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THE JUDGE OF THE FOUR CORNERS

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HON GEO S. HENRY

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No. 269.

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THE
JUDGE OF THE FOUR CORNERS

BY
George
G. B. BURGIN

AUTHOR OF "TUXTER'S LITTLE MAID," ETC., ETC.

"... neque severus esse (potest) in judicando, qui alios in se
severos esse judices non vult."—CICERO, *De Imp. Pomp.*

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1896

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THE
JUDGE OF THE FOUR CORNERS.

PROLOGUE.

DEPARTURE.

It was very dark. At "The Judge's" not a light could be seen, even from the upper windows, although the old oak clock in the hall gave forth only nine wheezily asthmatic notes, and, with a sudden internal grumbling at having broken the stillness, once more settled down to its reposeful "Forever—never, Never—forever." As the last stroke died away, a door opened suddenly on the floor above; there was the soft pad-pad-pad of stockinged feet down the staircase, and some one cautiously crept into the hall.

For a moment, this intruder on the clock's privacy fumbled with the bar across

the door, laid it softly aside, lit a lantern (which he muffled under his cloak), and pulled on a pair of soft doeskin mocassins. "Better not wear riding-boots," he muttered somewhat grimly. "If it should come to a fight, and Vankleek goes under, I don't want to be traced. Ikey Marston and Old Man Evans are as keen as sleuth-hounds when they once get hold of a trail. Mocassin tracks will soon fill up when the storm breaks; boot-heels stand out for months."

"The Judge"—for so Ducaine was generally known in the little Canadian village of Four Corners, this year of Grace, one thousand eight hundred and twenty-nine—slipped through the open door and slunk towards the stables, feeling his way along the house-wall, and stumbling over various unforeseen obstacles in the path—obstacles which seemed to have moved from familiar places in order to strike against his shins at every turn. When he reached the western corner of the house, Ducaine held up the lantern for a moment and looked hastily round.

Reassured by the silence, although he

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could not see more than six feet through the surrounding darkness, Ducaine opened the stable door and put the light upon the ground. A low whinny from the nearest compartment broke on his ear; the stolid beasts in the neighbouring stalls raised their heads for a moment, then continued dreamily to munch the sweet-smelling hay hanging from their racks.

As Ducaine entered the stall, a delicate nibble of caressing teeth met his hair and ear, and a soft muzzle rubbed against one cheek. He loosened the halter knot, led out his beautiful black mare, and saddled her hastily. "I'd better swim the Creek," he said, shutting the stable door. "If anything should happen, water doesn't leave traces."

Ducaine mounted, and turned the mare's head in the direction of the Creek. "Tchick! Gently, my beauty!" he cried when they came to the margin. The mare appeared to understand, for she slipped into the water as noiselessly as an otter.

The waters of the Creek, recently reinforced by heavy spring rains, were unpleasantly cold. A stray log struck the Judge on the right thigh and nearly

unhorsed him. He set his teeth together with an oath of pain, and reeled from the force of the blow. "I'd forgotten the floods," he said, as the mare felt her feet and walked quiveringly up the opposite bank. "Another log or two would have made a vacancy in the County Judgeship."

He bent down to whisper a word in the mare's ear. As he did so, her mighty quarters gathered beneath her, and she flew through the darkness at frightful speed, the reckless rider crouching low in the saddle to avoid dashing out his brains against a tree. Once, the overhanging branch of a pine tore the coat along Ducaine's back, with a rasping wrench which sent a shiver down his spine. A little ominous murmur high up the tall tree-trunks told of the gathering storm; there was a frightened patter and rustle of woodland things seeking shelter amid the thick undergrowth. The fierce fusillade of rain-drops, falling on the branches at irregular intervals, ceased for a while; only to descend with louder iteration as the wind, in forceful glee, threshed swaying boughs and trunks together. It was with an affrighted snort

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that the mare cleared the narrow Bush-path a little below Four Corners and drew up with heaving flanks; her glossy coat sweating and discoloured by the muddy waters of the Creek.

Ducaine tied the animal to a tree, shook the raindrops from his hat, and strode cautiously towards the village wharf—a long, low, wooden structure on piles which ran across the Ottawa river for a couple of furlongs. He turned off sharply towards the right, where it began to debouch upon the river, and came to a gate let into a rough stone wall.

After some trouble, Ducaine forced open the gate and stole towards a two-storied stone house which faced the river. The storm had now ceased, and a watery moon shone faintly out from the sullen sky, only to be overwhelmed from time to time by dark masses of cloud. Safely concealed among the bushes, Ducaine waited patiently for its reappearance. Suddenly a light shone in one of the upper windows; the door opened below; there was a confused murmur of voices, and a man walked down the rough path to the main gate.

When the man had gone, Ducaine crept into the verandah, climbed up a post at the corner, and made his way towards the window containing the light. "'Tisn't a very dignified position," he muttered, "for a Judge to be found in. However, I must learn the truth before I see Van-
kleek."

Although he drew himself along the verandah with the sinuous ease of a snake, a rotten shingle gave way beneath his foot and fell into the verandah below. Some one heard it, and opened the window with a frightened "What's that?"

"Oh, it's nothing. I reckon, Miss Wilks," said a feminine voice, "a little fresh air won't hurt neither of us."

The person addressed as Miss Wilks came to the window, carrying something in her arms. The watcher, a couple of feet below, lay perfectly still. "I wonder," she began. "I won——"

A thin, wailing cry broke upon the listener's ear, the cry of an infant facing the light—that protesting cry which is the first unconscious effort of every human being on its entrance into the world. "Hush-h, my

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pretty one! Hush, my pretty one!" said Miss Wilks's rough voice, its curious Cockney accent modified by a slight nasal twang picked up in Canada. "My! nurse, ain't she a daisy!"

The Judge started as the shadow of a small bundle crossed the blind. "It *is* a girl after all, confound it," he said. "Vankleek was right. Now for a thumping lie. They've got Miss Wilks in to help the nurse. Ugh! how beastly wet and cold I am."

He retraced his steps, and crept cautiously up to an apparently deserted hut on the outskirts of the village. In answer to his knock, however, the rickety door was flung open, and a young fellow of about twenty, whose flushed face showed that he had been drinking heavily, appeared on the threshold.

"Come in," he said quietly. "You seem wet, Judge."

Ducaine seized the bottle of whisky which stood on the pine table, and poured himself out a stiff half-tumbler.

"So would you be, Vankleek, if you'd had my ride. I'm only thirty, but it nearly turned my hair white."

The other motioned him to sit down. "Have a cigar?" he asked languidly, although his fingers twitched. "Wonder whether you have found out anything? If I'm right, and it's a girl, I can go back to Sadie and laugh about the whole affair. She'll have to give in." The obstinate brows contracted ominously. "I say she'll have to give in."

The Judge slowly lit the proffered cigar. "It's none of my business, Vankleek, to interfere now. I only do it because I loved the girl myself, though you won her. If I bore any malice towards either of you, I'd lie about the thing and make trouble. Yes, sir."

The other seized the bottle and drank heavily.

"Yes, yes, that's all right, Ducaine. There never would have been any trouble between Sadie and myself if it hadn't been for this infernal baby. We began it in joke. However, if it's a girl, it's all right, and the laugh's on my side."

"If it is a son, you won't humble yourself and make it up?"

"No, sir," shouted Vankleek, his handsome face flushing. "The Vankleeks aren't

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built that way. One of us has to knock under, but it's not going to be me. If Sadie has a son, I'll clear out for the States this very night."

"I suppose," said the Judge, quietly, "you'd shoot me if I told you what an infernal fool you are. To be sure, Sadie has rather an aggravating knack of wanting her own way. You Vankleeks, too, seem to think yourselves the uncrowned kings of Canada. Take my advice, put on your hat, and go home. It will be good enough if your son——"

Vankleek sprang to his feet with an oath, his handsome face flushing darker still.

"That's enough, Ducaine; I'm off to-night."

Ducaine looked at him commiseratingly. "I've said about as much as you'll take," he remarked. "However, it's no affair of mine. You'll look a mighty fool when you do come back, tail between legs, if the affair gets wind."

"When I do come back," said the other, significantly, "people round here won't laugh." He drew a ring from his finger.

"You're about the only man who has stuck to me. Suppose we exchange rings. If I find out some day that you have played me false, I'll send you yours back again. Then look out for yourself."

Ducaine laughed, drew a plain, thick gold ring from his finger, and handed it to Vankleek. "Sadie's ring," he exclaimed, looking at the one which Vankleek had drawn from his own finger.

"Yes," said Vankleek, picking up a valise from the corner; "Sadie's ring. Any more whisky?"

Ducaine hesitated a moment, then slipped the ring into his pocket. "To our next meeting," he cried, thrusting the neck of the bottle between his lips.

Vankleek drained the bottle after him and flung it into a corner.

"My horse is up in the village," he said, striding resolutely through the night.

Ducaine watched the retreating figure with a cynical smile. Hurried on by his thirst for revenge against the woman who had slighted him, the wily Judge suddenly bethought him of a still more malignant method of procedure than this carefully

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fostered difference between husband and wife. If the quarrelsome Vankleek did go to the States, he would probably be shot in a week ; no one in such a rough-and-ready country could, by any possibility, endure him for a longer period than that. But when the wife realized that she was deserted she would seek comfort in her baby, trace Vankleek's likeness in its eyes, carefully cherish each little infant trait which recalled that overbearing young fellow to her heart, and, as time went on, deem this runaway husband a saint from whom she had become estranged by her own obstinate pride. The girl would grow up the image of her father and prove a perpetual source of constraint between Mrs. Vankleek and himself. No, this would never do ; the child must be removed, and at once.

Thus hastily committed to a melodramatic series of crimes, Ducaine—he was essentially a man of action—returned to the wharf, and cautiously re-entered the garden. From his former post among the bushes, he could see a light burning faintly in the same window as before. For more than an hour he remained, benumbed with

cold, cursing the necessity which impelled him to such a course of conduct. At length the light died away from the window; he stole cautiously forward, climbed the verandah, and entered the room.

As Ducaine somewhat awkwardly came down from the verandah, he carried a bundle in one arm—a bundle at which the mare sniffed jealously. It contained something alive—something which came between her and her master. But when Ducaine patted and caressed her, she set off at a foot pace as if conscious of her frail burden. Ducaine was struck by her magnanimity. "I almost wonder she didn't want to savage it," he said, riding slowly on. "Poor little devil, it's beginning to travel early." The "poor little devil," having made its vigorous protest at being introduced into the world, peacefully went to sleep, its tiny red fingers curling round the Judge's hand.

It was an hour later than usual the next day when Ducaine opened his court. He moved stiffly, and did not recover his customary judicial imperturbability until he had sentenced a horse-thief with the utmost rigour of the law. It was only

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when the prisoner had been removed, after expressing with all the rough, untutored eloquence of a child of nature a desire for ten minutes' confidential intercourse with His Honour, that the Judge learned from Ikey Marston how Vankleek had disappeared during the night and taken his new-born child with him.

"Looks as if he'd quarrelled with the mother for good and all," suggested His Honour. "Vankleek's probably gone crazy, and drowned the child as well as himself. Call the next case, and don't interrupt the court when it is in session."

"Old Man" Evans meantime carefully scrutinized His Honour from the back of the court.

"I rather thought he knew somethin' about it himself," he said to Ikey Marston, when that worthy rejoined him. "He was too dum quiet about it to please me."

"Thar might be a little fun," suggested Ikey. "S'posin' we was to find out he's mixed up in it, what 'ud happen?"

Old Man dubiously shook his head. "Never was a phrenerologist, was ye, Ikey?"

"Never." Ikey was visibly pained. "I may have lifted a hoss or two—jest for fun—but I never was as bad as all that."

Old Man waxed angry. "Phrenerolergy tells you people's characters from their eyes. Now, look at the Judge's eye. Did you ever see one like it?"

"No." Ikey was full of admiration at Old Man's scientific attainments. "I never did. What's it mean?"

"It means"—Old Man's whisper became very impressive—"it means if you git in his way he'll down you for sure; that's what his eye means."

"D'you think——?"

"I mean he's most likely got a bullet in his thigh from Vankleek's pistol, an' I'm jest agoin' to file the dockermments in this yer case for future reference. He's had that eye on me for some time. I reckon we'll git out of its range for a bit; it's unlucky, that eye is, for you an' me."

"I don't want to leave jest now, Old Man."

"Why not?"

"It's Miss Wilks. She's so real high-toned since they give her the choice of

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doin' time or bein' shipped out of England, people think she must be somebody. Now she won't have nothin' to say to me."

"I've prederlickshuns in that quarter myself," said Old Man, whose real age was only thirty-five, "though it does go agin the grain to think she takes in washin' for a livin'."

Their whispered confidences were put an end to by His Honour adjourning the court and striding past them with a darkly suspicious glance. It was with an unaccountable feeling of relief that Ducaine heard later in the day of their projected "prospectin' tour." They were the last persons in the world he wanted about him just then.

Cold and callous as he was, Ducaine shrank from picturing to himself Mrs. Vankleek's grief at the mysterious disappearance of both husband and child, and for many months carefully avoided the stone house by the wharf. But, somehow, as time went on, he could not help awakening at that dark moment of the night which precedes dawn, and feeling conscious of a certain thrill. Baby fingers of a little child

clung round his own and held him back from sleep. His own wife had died in giving birth to a girl a few months ago, and the hapless infant had been handed over to an Irish wet-nurse in a distant village. People noticed that the Judge frequently left Four Corners for a week at a time, and surmised that he had gone to visit his own child; but that look in his eye which exercised so restraining an influence on Old Man and Ikey Marston prevented them from asking inconvenient questions.

After a year or two, every one gave up inquiring into the mystery of Vankleek's fate—every one, that is, with the exception of Old Man.

"I've got a sort of idea," he confidentially declared to Ikey, as they sat smoking their corn-cob pipes at sundown outside the little cabin they shared in common, "as thar's somethin' hidin' behind that eye of the Judge's—somethin' as wants gittin' at,—an' I shouldn't be surprised if you an' me, Ikey, was the humble instruments of Providence predestinated to git it."

"Maybe," said the stolid Ikey—"maybe. I ain't agoin' to worry over it. Not much.

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Vankleek 'll come back, some day, an' bring the child with him. I'm jest agoin' to lie low an' watch the Judge's little game."

"You don't feel sorter called on to git behind that eye?"

"Not a feel! When I got thar, I might find a revolver waitin' for me. I ain't no Doxologist, as you call it, but I know enuff to keep low for a bit. Don't you?"

Old Man snorted a disgusted dissent, but prudently held his tongue. He was not yet ready for action.

CHAPTER I.

TWENTY YEARS AFTER.

THE "Invalid Season" at the "Springs" had scarcely begun; consequently those pioneers of fashion whose systems were supposed to require the tonic yet chastening influences of the mineral springs, did not consider themselves bound to that simplicity of diet and restraint, in the matter of cocktails, popularly supposed to be necessary to give full effect to the curative properties of the waters which gushed out of the primitive Bush, half a mile above the hotel, and flowed impatiently down into rude wells excavated for their reception. The waters themselves obstinately refused to be taken in conjunction with cocktails or any other inspiring beverages; they knew their work, and declined to be hampered by alcoholic hindrances.

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The pioneers of the season, having speedily discovered this important fact, did not trouble further in the matter of treatment, but contented themselves with an occasional stroll up to the source of the springs as a mere matter of courtesy. They could support an existence bereft of sulphur water, but not one devoid of cocktails. Without being aware of it, however, they were steadily going through a curative course of the waters; for the landlord of the hotel, indignant at the slight put upon the springs, served up to his guests a peculiarly delicious chicken-broth every day, which was nothing more nor less than hot water from one of the springs thickened with oatmeal. In old days, a particular spring had been well known to the Iroquois medicine-men, as possessing this peculiar property when the waters were heated. After an unsuccessful hunt, the braves of the tribe had been wont to solace their stomachs and relieve the pressing pangs of hunger without regard to ulterior consequences. Dwellers in the hotel, however, not having the benefit of local tradition, wondered at their own sudden joyousness;

innocently attributing it to the peaceful nature of days spent on the borders of the Bush, and the balsamic odours of cedar and pine which skirted the rude roadway.

At eight o'clock one evening in early summer, the Springs coach loomed up against the white background of the hotel buildings, as half-a-dozen spectators lounged leisurely out from the bar, and proceeded to expectorate with graceful fluency and precision on the verandah floor.

On this particular evening, the guests were not inclined to take active measures of any sort. They lounged about the verandah, threw themselves back in favourite chairs, tilted up their heels on others, and prepared to criticize the driver of the coach when he should condescend to appear from the bar, obsequiously attended by the landlord still pressing eleemosynary strong waters upon his acceptance.

The leaders, fretful and eager to be off, threw up their heads impatiently at the caressing touch of the driver's hand. As Lajeunesse climbed slowly to his seat, ignoring the concourse on the verandah with the stoicism of a Huron, he turned to

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a young fellow, who had been admitted to the proud privilege of drinking with him all the way down.

"Haven't seen such a night for years," he said, gathering the rug round him. "It's always black when there's a lawyer about. Lives down at Four Corners. Judge Ducaine. No wonder I've only one passenger left when there's a lawyer inside."

The young fellow turned up his coat collar.

"'Tisn't a nice night," he said lightly. "Hadn't we better stop over?" He cast a boyish glance in the direction of the saloon, whence issued sounds of revelry, mingled with snatches of song. It was warm in there, the cuisine was good, and Beauty kept the bar, impartially distributing smiles in proportion to the status of customers. Why renounce this unexpected accumulation of good things for a cold seat on the coach, and a chance of being "held up" in the darkness? He somewhat apprehensively felt for the belt containing his scanty stock of money, laughed with youthful inconsequence, and

repeated his question, "Hadn't we better stop over?"

"Young man," said the autocratic Lajeunesse, impressively gathering up his reins, "air you runnin' this concern or me?"

"Wish I were," replied the young fellow, with unqualified admiration. "I haven't the sand. You don't suppose I'm man enough to drive like you?"

"Prezakerley," said the unmollified Lajeunesse; though a grim smile at the corners of his mouth showed that he was not insensible to this whole-hearted admiration. "Prezakerley. That bein' the case, p'r'aps you'll sit tight. I reckon you'll have to sit extremely tight to-night; I ain't goin' to be publicly disgraced by drivin' this yer coach into Four Corners with only a lawyer in it. No, sir. Sit tight, for all you're worth."

As he spoke, the ungainly vehicle went swaying into the darkness, whilst certain unjudicial utterances were heard to proceed from the interior of the coach, when Judge Ducaine's head thumped against the side.

"Serve him right," said Lajeunesse,

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flicking his off-leader. "That'll knock some of the stuffin' out of him."

"You don't seem to love him?" said the young Englishman, astonished by the unwonted fervour of Lajeunesse's speech.

"Love ain't exactly the correct word," dryly rejoined Lajeunesse, his taciturnity overcome by the exhilarating sound of the Judge's protests from within the coach. "He diddled me once over a hoss-trade. You bet, my son, I haven't forgotten it."

The young Englishman apprehensively sat tight as the leaders raced down an incline and galloped up the opposite slope.

"Sure you know the way?" he asked. "Seems to me we've just run over a tree, or a cow, or something."

"My son," said Lajeunesse, "we'll run over more'n a tree before I've done with His Honour. I've got him landed in the dock, so to speak, with me for judge and jury, and he'll have to stay there till he's let out. He's all them Vankleek deeds with him. Says he's a mortgage on the place. He's bringing down the deeds now before takin' possession, the skunk."

The passenger scented a story. "But what does Vankleek say to it all?" he asked tentatively.

"That's what people would like to know; only, you see, Vankleek ain't been heard of for twenty years."

"Oh," cried the passenger, forgetting his desire to know more about Vankleek in the immediate necessities of the moment, "there goes my hat!"

"As you're afeared, sittin' up here, you'd better git inside and hold the Judge's head for him. If the coach was to go over—if it was, I say, and such things have been known—then you'd make sure of breakin' every bone in your body; whiles here——" He paused appreciatively, and again flicked the off-leader, causing that long-suffering animal to retaliate with a frightful plunge, which threatened to upset the coach altogether.

"While here?" queried the young Englishman, in the tone of one for whom the bitterness of death has no terrors.

"You'll break your neck right off, and git it over," said Lajeunesse, cheerfully. "No patchin' you up with ornamental

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wooden legs or any of that stuff. You'd just break your neck straight off. Oh, thar's a style in fallin' off a box-seat. Real style when you know how to do it. Steady, my lads; steady there!"

The young Englishman relapsed into saddened silence. He would much rather have been inside the coach with Ducaine for a companion, but feared to encounter Lajeunesse's ill-concealed derision. Besides, he was an Englishman. In spite of this consoling fact, all the coach accidents he had ever heard of floated through his brain as the horses hurried on, their rattling harness making a somewhat superfluously cheerful accompaniment to cheerless thoughts.

"Is there—is there any need for all this hurry?" he asked Lajeunesse, although apprehensive of receiving another rebuff from that irascible worthy.

"Hurry? You bet there's need to hurry, my son," responded Lajeunesse. "The waybill books you to be landed at Four Corners in time for the night-boat, and you'll be hustled down there if you come to pieces while I'm doing it."

The Englishman scarcely appreciated Lajeunesse's delicate consideration.

"Oh no," he said, with an elaborate affectation of carelessness; "I'm in no hurry. If this is your way of travelling, I'll get used to it, or—break my neck!"

They were now galloping at breakneck speed through a patch of Bush leading to the L'Ange Gardienne dip. There was barely room for the coach along the narrow, rutty way, but Lajeunesse never for one instant relaxed his reckless haste. He did not get a chance of scaring an Englishman every day. His companion's remark had put him on his mettle, and he was resolved to show what a Canadian driver could do. The coach dashed on beneath the brushing branches of overhanging pines, a faint glow-worm light from the lamps making two red patches on the ground, which kept pace with its headlong speed. All was darkness and silence save for the occasional cry of some unclean night-bird. The young Englishman at last realized that it mattered little whether he dashed out his brains against an overhanging tree, broke his neck in falling, or smashed every limb when the

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coach upset. Something unpleasant seemed inevitable. In the mean time, he enjoyed the rush of the cool night-air on his forehead, the tingling of the wind against his outstretched palms. There was no need to hold on now. He bobbed up and down like a cork, knowing that he was securely fastened in by the driver's heavy wraps.

"Got a gun?" asked Lajeunesse, suddenly, as they emerged from the Bush; and his leaders, a little spent by their fiery outburst, slowed down on the level bit of road preceding the dip.

"N—no. Why? I couldn't hit anything from here."

"Oh, nothin', nothin'! A little ahead's the usual place for road-agents. They got me here year afore last. You bet, the Judge's loaded up to his eye-teeth. I don't want to lose the pull of gallopin' up the dip, so here goes. We must chance it."

The young Englishman clenched his teeth as the groaning coach rattled into the dip. Suddenly Lajeunesse's practised eye detected a dark obstacle ahead of him in the gloom. Before he could pull up, the coach was into it. The next moment there

was a crash. Lajeunesse, still holding the reins, went one way, the apprehensive passenger another. When the Englishman recovered consciousness, the leaders had kicked themselves free, and stood quietly by the coach as it lay on one side in the darkness. He made a motion to get up, but could only faintly wonder what was about to happen next. In the midst of his own pain, he was not wholly grief-stricken that the horn of Lajeunesse had been lowered in the dust.

"If I was you, stranger," said a persuasive voice in his ear, "I'd make up my mind to stop here an' not take a hand in this yer game."

The icy barrel of a pistol as it touched the young fellow's neck sent a cold chill through him. He collapsed with a groan.

"You not bein' hurt, for I've felt all over you," continued the gentle voice of the unknown — "might just as well know nothin' about this yer business. You won't know nothin'. Swear!"

Again the insinuating pistol barrel touched the nape of his neck.

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"I swear," said the young man, faintly.
 "I thought it wasn't an accident."

A low chuckle came through the darkness.

"It's a sort of accident," the voice said confidentially. "A sort of accident. I've bin leadin' up to it for the last twenty years. But as you've given your word never to know nothin' about it, I reckon you can sit up. Have a drink?"

A nip of fiery whisky put new life into the young man.

"I give you my word," he said gratefully, "I'll never know anything about this affair, even if we come face to face to-morrow. I'm a stranger here, and have nothing to do with—with local incidents."

He sat up, ruefully rubbing his head as the stranger tied him to a tree.

"Now," said the same insinuating voice, "you'll be all right and comfortable till mornin'. If you'd like a chaw of baccy, stranger, jest say so."

"Englishmen don't chaw," said the young man, disgustedly.

"Is that so? It'll help you to think over local incidents," said the voice in

tones of sympathetic commiseration. "I s'posed Englishmen was always chawin' up everything and everybody. To think of it now; all that money in the country an' not one chaw! You all orter be shot for such darned meanness."

The young fellow perceived the futility of arguing against this primeval simplicity. His hands were tied.

"I don't chaw," he repeated; "and, what's more, I don't want to."

"Wal, wal," continued the same persuasive voice, "thar's worse things than a chaw a night like this, when you've been upset by a local incident. But if your principles is agin it, I don't want to argify. You jest keep quiet; you'll be all right when we've fixed up the Judge."

"All right; I've sworn."

A horny hand felt for his through the darkness, and shook it with friendly force. "It's a local incident, an' you, bein' an Englishman an' a tenderfoot, don't know nothin' about it. That's what it is—a local incident." He seemed highly delighted at the words, repeating them with a quiet chuckle of chastened enjoyment.

A moment later, Lajeunesse's cries, raised in violent objurgation, broke upon the air.

"We had to tie him up first," said the voice, apologetically, "he bein' sorter free with his weppings an' quicker to come round. Ain't it real nice to hear him cover the ground in that high-toned way, hittin' the mark plum-centre every time, so to speak! Young man, Lajeunesse don't offen let himself loose like that, but when he does, it's an opportunity an' a privilege."

When the moon began to rise through the pitchy blackness of the night, the young Englishman could dimly discern Lajeunesse and another man tied against a couple of trees on the other side of the road. Some one was feeling in the upturned coach and brought up a box. As it was hurriedly opened, the Englishman heard an exclamation of satisfaction and the creaking of parchment. When he looked up again, the road-agents had disappeared.

In spite of his uncomfortable position, and a nasty cut on the back of his head, the young Englishman fell into a troubled sleep from which he was awakened at day-break by a chipmunk running over him. The

Judge and Lajeunesse still remained tied to their respective trees. By dint of hitching himself up sideways, the passenger contrived to get out a knife and cut his bonds. Then he limped across the road in order to free the others. The near wheeler lay dead with a broken leg, caused by the trees which had been rolled across the roadway. The off-wheeler and leaders, tied to a cedar, stamped occasionally for their morning feed. One had received a slight cut, but the others were without a scratch.

Lajeunesse sorrowfully regarded his dead wheeler.

"If it hadn't been for your fool questions last night," he said to the young Englishman, "I'd have seen what was goin' on. Reckon you've lost your deeds, Judge."

"Yes," said the latter, stiffly; "they were evidently the object of this attack."

He gloomily hobbled up to a horse, mounted it, and set off at a foot pace for Four Corners. Lajeunesse, his foot in a stirrup, hastily improvised out of a trace, slowly prepared to follow the Judge.

The Englishman was about to start after Lajeunesse when, in trying to get on

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the horse, he felt his belt press against the harness. Hastily dismounting, he opened it and began to count a roll of notes and gold. No, there was nothing missing; his money had not been touched. Evidently the object of the "local incident" was not mere robbery. More bewildered than ever, he stiffly remounted his steed, which was anxiously trying to follow the others, and set off at a trot. The motion of the horse caused him acute pain. The back of his head ached violently; he was sore all over from the effects of the fall. At the top of the hill overlooking the little village he pulled up for a moment, ostensibly to admire the scenery, but in reality to ease his limbs, through which the blood now began to course freely.

The young man inhaled the pure air with increasing delight. "I feel like Moses in sight of the Promised Land," he said with unconscious irreverence. "Better go down and take possession. There ought to be good farms in that lovely valley. Why, I've had more adventures since I left our little Hertfordshire home than in all the rest of my life put together. I'd like to

breed horses as good as this. Gently! Whoa, lad! Stop, I say!"

But the impatient horse set off at a gallop, and declined to stop until he reached the open space in front of the Four Corners Hotel, where a curious crowd had already surrounded Lajeunesse and the Judge.

"Who's that?" asked the landlord as the young Englishman rode into their midst and feebly slid to the ground.

"That," echoed Lajeunesse, pausing in the eloquent recital of his wrongs—"That's the durned tenderfoot whose fool talk let me in for all this everlastin' trouble."

But the "tenderfoot" almost fainted, for the rapid motion of the horse had increased the pain in his head to a frightful extent. He was not in a condition to explain matters to an angry crowd of men, all talking at once and wildly anxious to kill some one as a necessary preliminary to finding out who had attacked the coach.

"Take him to the gaol," said Ducaine sternly; "his evidence may be wanted. They'll make him comfortable there."

"Guess I'll look after him, Judge," said a meek, quiet voice, which sent a thrill

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through the young Englishman, as Old Man Evans came through the crowd and lifted him up. "'Tain't the way to treat a harmless young Britisher with his head burst open. Here, Ikey, you take his head an' I'll look after them long legs. Now then, we'll jest tote him over to the shanty. A square meal 'll do him most good."

Thus it was that Harry Davenport came to the village of Four Corners and took possession of it in a state of semi-unconsciousness. When he opened his eyes again it was to find himself in a pleasant shanty by the riverside, whilst through the open door came the soothing, rhythmical buzz of a distant saw-mill cutting up spring lumber.

Old Man was busily bandaging a huge cut at the back of Davenport's head, whilst Ikey of the ginger locks fried something on a stove in a shed outside.

"Where am I?" faintly asked Davenport.

"To hum," answered Old Man, with modest pride. "To hum," he repeated. "You've bin asleep all day, so I let you alone. Guess you're powerfully hungry. What 'll you take when I've finished this yer bandage?"

"Hungry! I'm starving."

"Ikey, bring in the tenderfoot a couple of pounds of meat to begin with," said Old Man, conscious that heroic remedies were needed for such a case as this. "You kin do yer fancy cookin' arterwards."

"But how did I get here?" persisted the young man, raising himself on one elbow.

Old Man regarded his guest with a benevolent yet searching optic. Apparently Davenport's frank open face satisfied him, for he reached down a huge tin plate from the wall and carefully polished it with his elbow.

"Jest a sort of local incident," he remarked blandly. "Ikey, whar's the corn-cake?"

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CHAPTER II.

THE JUDGE SUSPECTS.

DAVENPORT sat up, soul in nostrils, eyes starting out of his head with impatience, as the appetizing smell of Ikey's cooking was wafted into the hut. That talented *chef* cast a gratified glance at his guest, and gave the frying-pan a twist which evoked so ravishing an odour that, weak though he was, it pulled the young fellow to his feet. Satisfied with this involuntary tribute to his culinary powers, Ikey came in, washed the tin plate in a pail of water, and proceeded to warm it at the fire.

"Old Man," he said reproachfully, "you've no more manners 'n a hog. Baar meat's wasted on you. When we has comp'ny, you did orter put on a little more style. You bein' a marryin' kind of man"—Old Man started guiltily—"oughtn't to go a

gormin' our best plate like that. Whar's the green corn?"

"Thar ain't no green corn," feebly protested Old Man, whilst Davenport suffered agonies of impatience.

"Young man," said Ikey, sternly, "you kin safely take it as a gin'ral rule as I fires when Old Man fires; but he's that powerful set on marryin', is Old Man, he ain't responsible half the time for what he's doin', an' tother half"—the speaker transferred a delicate mass of meat to Davenport's plate—"he's pawin' wild flowers an' stuff that woman lures him on with. *Did* Miss Wilks give you any green corn yesterday, Old Man?"

Old Man turned a coppery hue, which in any other countenance would have been a blush.

"I clean forgot it."

"Yousee, Stranger"—Ikey handed Davenport the savoury food—"he's runnin' arter what he calls 'the gentler sex' all the time, whiles I'm fattenin' of him up for the sacrifice an' holdin' of him in. He ain't responsible—that's what's the matter with him—he ain't responsible."

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Old Man held out another plate for his share of the banquet, somewhat sheepishly attempting to turn the conversation.

"He's that dum foolish, Old Man is," continued Ikey, sitting down on a three-legged stool, his portion of meat on a hunk of corn-bread, there not being enough plates to go round—"He's that dum foolish, is Old Man, he won't let me cut his hair any more. Must go down to the barber at Hawkinsville an' come back stinkin' like a rose-bush. Oh, you should jest have smelt it! I had to sleep outside till it wore off."

Old Man's coppery substitute for a blush again became visible.

"I wouldn't be givin' away the fam'ly secrets all at once," he said gently. "You bein' a sort of mahogynist, Ikey, don't understand the softenin' infloences of female sassiety. Your great talent's cookin'; that's what it is. Cookin'! I'd rather eat a hind leg of mule transmogerified by you than a dinner at the Judge's."

Ikey flushed with gratified pride. He had not the slightest idea of what Old Man meant by calling him a "mahogynist," but concluded it had something to do with

his general antipathy to women. Old Man, in moments of embarrassment, was apt to throw out words of this kind, so that he might effect a cuttle-fish sort of retreat under cover of their incomprehensibility.

Ikey, visibly mollified, continued to eat. "Never you git to runnin' arter wimmen," he said in fatherly tones to Davenport, at the same time replenishing his plate. "Wimmen is—wimmen! Poor critturs, they can't help it. Specially when Old Man's had his hair cut. He didn't orter do it, but when Old Man makes up his mind, you'd think he was a kind of human airthquake. Thar ain't no holdin' of him. I'm not denyin'," he added, with judicial impartiality, "as I sorter encourage him to trade posies for vegetables with her"—he jerked his thumb in the direction of the open doorway—"but he allers gits that mixed up he forgits to bring 'em away with him, 'sides compromisin' of himself till I has to chip in an' draw her on to my trail. She'll get one of us some day, sure as you're born."

"She can't make up her mind," declared Old Man, with a grin, referring to the

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Man, unknown fair one. "I've got more style in me than Ikey, but he's handier for cleanin' up an' doin' chores gin'rally. You wouldn't know him o' Sundays. Hair greased, claw-hammer, boots you could see your face in. He's a terrible man, is Ikey, when he's dressed. Quite a diff'rent skin."

"Thar ain't no tellin' what colour yours is any day," said Ikey, visibly roused by this last remark. "'Sides, I done it all for your good. 'Tain't no pleasure to me to talk pretty to Miss Wilks."

Though Old Man continued to eat with placid enjoyment, no one but his familiar friend would have dared to gird at him before a stranger. Davenport began to feel better with every mouthful. His long sleep had banished the effects of shock and exposure. As he sat in the hut, looking through the open doorway at the purpling patches of shadow on the grass, it seemed to him that he had fallen among friends, that it would be useless to continue his journey to the Far West. Surely, by dint of hard work, a decent living might be picked up in this uncouth community. The inhabitants—most of them were sitting before

their doors—did not seem to suffer from over-exertion; if they managed to exist, why shouldn't he? Besides, his hosts were indubitably friendly. Would that friendliness continue when Old Man knew of his resolve to become a citizen of Four Corners? There was the mystery of last night still impending. It was impossible to believe that the dulcet-toned, harmless individual whose magnificent teeth were now masticating more bear's meat, should have put that exceedingly cold pistol barrel to his ear the night before without having some good motive for doing so. A glance at Old Man's hip-pocket—Old Man's visible costume consisted of boots, pants tucked into them, flannel shirt, and a hat which his friends declared he slept in—showed the slightly protruding butt of a revolver, which was evidently not intended for merely ornamental purposes. Ikey, too, carried a similar weapon in a precisely identical pocket.

"I has to be that careful of Old Man," he declared, noticing Davenport's glance, "when he's foolin' round, that I dussent go about 'ithout a wepping."

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Davenport noticed the humorous twinkle in Old Man's eyes at this remark. It was a transparent fiction between the two that Old Man required protection, that his childish impetuosity would eventually land him into a gaol unless Ikey's restraining hand were stretched forth to moderate his unreasonableness. When Davenport remembered the scene the night before, and the part Old Man had taken in it, there seemed to be something wrong about this theory. Could the horseman with the box have been Ikey? And if so, what had become of it? Then he remembered his oath, and leaned back against the wall with a sigh compounded of reflection and content.

"Old Man wantin' to treat you like one of the fam'ly, Stranger," said Ikey, noticing this action on Davenport's part, "we reckoned not to discommerdate you with fancy fixins. Consequently, thar ain't nothin' else; no puttin' on frills with pies or suchlike foolishness."

But, quietly triumphant, Old Man reached up to the shelf above his head, and produced a pie—a solid, indisputable pie, with a crust of metamorphic massiveness.

"She give it me more'n a month ago ; I forgot that too," he said gently. "Maybe it'll do if it's warmed."

Ikey caught up the pie and hurled it through the open doorway.

"It's a deep-laid plot of that woman to git one of us out of the way," he said darkly. "If you wants pamperin' with pie, I'll make somethin' human ; but you don't touch that. I shouldn't wonder if thar was apples in it too," he added, with a dim recollection of the temptation of Eve.

Old Man resignedly reached down a tin cup.

"I guess, Stranger," he said, "you'd better not look upon the wine cup when it's red, or any other colour, till your head's left off achin' a bit. Me an' Ikey bein' given over to destruction, so to speak, it don't matter what we drink. 'Sides, the whisky's nearly all gone."

Davenport nodded. "It's still buzzing about a bit." He felt his head rather ruefully. "Canada's a pretty hard country to strike."

Old Man nodded affirmatively, and reached down from the same shelf which had con-

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tained the pie a gorgeous Indian calumet with feather-ornamented stem and bowl carved out of soapstone.

"'Twas give me by an' old Injun chief whose ponies I got back for him," he explained.

"How?" asked Davenport.

"A mean white stole 'em, after smokin' the peace-pipe. He had to die then. The world hadn't no use for him. 'Twas a fair fight; Kickin' Horse would tuck in a bit of t'other chap's hair among the feathers for a momentum," Old Man reminiscently remarked, searching for the lock in question.

"I guess it's rubbed off."

"And you got away all right?"

"I've bin a good deal among Injuns in my time," Old Man said thoughtfully; "most of 'em wants killin', whether meat for missionaries or bad Injuns; but they're allers fair an' square arter smokin' the peace-pipe. Now, Ikey, if you ain't no moral scruples agin it, we'll smoke the peace-pipe with——"

"Davenport, my name is—Harry Davenport."

Davenport noticed the delicacy with which

his hosts had refrained from asking any questions about himself. Gentlemen who came to Four Corners were not, as a rule, in the habit of giving high-sounding names. Indeed, some simple physical characteristic or infirmity usually determined the immediate selection of an appropriate *nom de guerre*, which was found to be far more satisfactory for purposes of identification than the multisyllabic patronymics of alien climes.

"Couldn't you make it 'Bill'?" Ikey inquired. "Thar was a one-eyed chap from Hawkinsville, 'Blazin' Bill,' but he's doin' time now for blazin' away once too often. Jest for a little playfulness too."

"Rode through the window of Miller's store," supplemented Old Man, by way of explanation. "Winged Miller, and the Judge give him six months to pursue his ge-erlogical studies in. He won't be out for another month."

"Geological studies!" echoed Davenport. "I don't understand."

"It's this yer way," continued Old Man, carefully loading his peace-pipe, after slicing off tobacco from a cake which dwelt in some

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mysterious recess about his person. "When a man's bin sorter goin' free, we takes away his weppings an' hands him over a hammer an' a heap of stones. The gaoler puts him in striped britches so's he shan't spoil his own, and makes him crack specimens till the stones give out. If thar ain't nothin' valooable in these yer specimens, he mends roads with 'em to git an appetite."

"Oh—h! I see."

Old Man nodded, raked out an ember from the fire, and lit the peace-pipe. Solemnly drawing a long whiff, he handed it to Davenport, who did likewise, and hesitatingly regarded Ikey.

"I smokes when Old Man smokes," said Ikey, stretching out a huge fist. He also took a whiff, and the pipe continued to circulate from hand to hand until the tobacco was exhausted.

"Davey'd be better'n Bill," suddenly suggested Old Man, after sitting in silence for some time. "If Miller was to plug Blazin' Bill when he comes out, he'd feel sorter bound to finish off all the other Bills in the place jest to keep his hand in."

This argument seemed sufficiently sound

to settle the matter at once. Davenport had not the slightest inclination to be butchered for the mere sake of the association of names. Miller was probably a man with fixed ideas, who shot first and listened to explanations when they were too late to affect the accuracy of an aim which was alike his neighbours' terror and delight.

"It's only losenin' off the front part of your name," urged Old Man, quick to see the impression which he had made on Davenport. "'Davey Davenport' folk'll cotton to. Shake, Davey; Ikey, shake."

They all shook hands with grave cordiality, only one quick glance from beneath Old Man's shaggy brows assuring Davenport that Ikey knew nothing of the inner history of the previous night. "You have eaten my bread and salt," the look seemed to say; "you have smoked the peace-pipe with me; for good or ill, you are one of us." In spite of his diplomacy, there was a transparent honesty about Old Man which won Davenport's heart.

The trio sat in silence for some time, watching the spirals of smoke as they

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wreathed themselves upward and disappeared. Davenport was the first to speak.

"I've made up my mind to stay here and farm," he said suddenly to Old Man. "I hope you'll both help me?"

Old Man brightened up visibly. "Thar's Ikey now," he drawled, "jest a spilin' to show off his muscle. Was you reckonin' to go in for uncleared land?"

"Ye-es," Davenport hesitated.

"Do Ikey a world of good," rejoined Old Man, meaningly. "He's been a-waxin' fat an' kickin', accordin' to the Scriptures, for weeks past. You wouldn't think, now, he's got some Bush-land of his own; the trouble is, he can't make up his mind which end to begin at; he's bin thinkin' it over for the last two years. When Ikey begins to think, it takes time."

"I'll buy it from him," said Davenport, eagerly.

Ikey laid a restraining hand on his arm. "'Ithout me an' Old Man to look arter you, you'd lose your skin in a week. I'll give it you, or you kin go shares."

Old Man regarded Ikey with increased respect.

"Makes me think I'm a little sinless crittur a-playin' marbles in the Garden of Eden agin," he said approvingly. "If I don't take keer of you babes, you'll give yourselves away next. We'll go over to La'yer Pike to-morrow an' look into things."

Davenport was about to return thanks to his new friends for their considerate kindness, when a shadow darkened the doorway. Old Man's face immediately became a mask with two piercing eyes which surveyed Ducaine angrily. He did not attempt to get up to receive the Judge. Neither did Ikey. "I sit when Old Man sits," seemed to flash through the latter's mind. Davenport noticed that the two friends understood one another by a kind of telepathic communication.

The Judge nodded stiffly, as he leant against the doorway. Ikey had returned to the corncob of domestic life, but Old Man still smoked the peace-pipe. The Judge knew that pipe. On previous occasions, when it had been smoked with some friend of Old Man's, the after-results of their council together had not been

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particularly pleasant for Ducaine. Knowing the kind of men with whom he had to deal, the Judge did not beat about the bush. His tone was as quietly indifferent as if he were saying good evening to a casual stranger.

"Oh, Evans, how much will you take to restore those deeds?" he inquired.

Ikey sprang up, but Old Man restrained him with a wave of the gaudily feathered pipe-stem.

"You're jest a little too late, Judge. We've been doin' a deal with our young friend here."

"Pshaw! You know what I mean."

"You speak sorter legal English, Judge; 'tain't so easy as you think. I don't know but what if you was wishful for more land, we might let you have that bit of Bush of Ikey's arter all. We could git some more lower down the Creek. Davey'll sell it agin at a good price."

The Judge frowned angrily.

"It's a valooable bit of Bush," observed Ikey, joining in the conversation for the first time. "A valooable bit of land, now I come to think of it. Full of

tamarack, an' cedar, an' skeeters, an' hoss flies."

The Judge frowned again at this transparent irrelevance.

"I'll give you two thousand dollars for it, with"—he paused for a moment—"the missing Vankleek deeds thrown in."

Ikey again leaped to his feet. "Look here, Judge, if you mean——"

Old Man smiled at Ikey, admiringly. "Don't get riled, Ikey. The Judge's only askin' you to compound a felony, that's all. He wants them deeds back to make a present of 'em to the widder Vankleek. Next time you take to holdin' up the mail, Ikey, you needn't skin an old friend like the Judge."

Ikey was speechless with wrath, but the Judge paid no attention to him.

"If I get those deeds back in a week," he said with freezing severity, "I'll pay two thousand dollars for them and ask no questions; if I don't get them back in that time, both of you had better beware."

Old Man nodded imperturbably. "I'll reason with Ikey, Judge, but you know the partickler sort of mule he is; 'tain't easy to

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make him let go anythin'; I'll wrastle with him, Judge—wrastle with him powerfully. You couldn't make it another thousand? Ikey's allers wantin' to sling on style an' marry."

The Judge gazed at Old Man's leathery countenance as if to pierce his very soul. The fire in Old Man's eyes had died away; his placid drawl was that of conscious innocence; he looked with wondering pity at the Judge.

"You're workin' too hard at them books of yourn, Judge; you want a rest."

The Judge shrugged his shoulders with a disgusted air.

"Of course you saw the man who tied you up?" he asked, turning to Davenport.

Old Man also shrugged his shoulders. "I'm s'prised at you, Judge. S'prised! You, a La'yer, an' puttin' us all in the dock, so to speak, jest acause you lost somebody's else's deeds. Young man"—turning to Davenport—"did you see any one tyin' you up last night?"

"Certainly not," said Davenport, with an enthusiasm which caused the Judge to

recognize that Old Man had found an ally. Their looks crossed. Anger gleamed from the Judge's eyes, from Davenport's a quiet assurance that he was not to be intimidated. The Judge lost his temper.

"I've a good mind to issue warrants for the three of you," he cried.

Ikey sprang to his feet for the third time, but Old Man checked him with a wave of the hand.

"You not bein' born in these yer parts, Judge," he said with elaborate politeness, "nat'rally don't realize ev'ry man as is born here likes to view his own scenery t'other side of the way 'ithout the intervention of any obstructin' or furrin substance atween him an' it."

Ducaire glared at him. "I don't follow you."

"Git," said Old Man, quietly; "that's my meanin' in plain an' unornamental langwidge, Judge. Git! Next time I feel to need your interestin' conversation I'll clean up and come round. These yer humble surroundin's—not but what Ikey's gifts orter be took into account—ain't high-toned enough for you, Judge. Till me an' Ikey can sling

on a little more style, we'll struggle along 'ithout the honour of your comp'ny."

"I warn you, young man, to continue your journey," said Ducaine, sternly, addressing Davenport, "or to disassociate yourself from these lawless men. In a little while you may not have the chance."

Davenport felt that a decisive moment had come in which he must make a stand if he wished to remain at Four Corners. Besides, his head throbbed with pain. He yearned to lie down and sleep, to dream of the old English home with its blossoming orchards, its sweet May flowers and green beauty, its ordered richness and majestic peace. But Old Man looked at him curiously; Ikey, too, regarded him with doubtful eyes. A happy inspiration occurred to Davenport.

"Thank you," he said quietly to the Judge, who was lighting a cigar preparatory to departure. "I'm much obliged to you for your warning; but I should have placed more belief in it had you bound up my head and fed me like my friends here. 'I fires when Old Man fires.'"

Ducaine leisurely lit his cigar, indifferently

threw down the match, and went away without a word. It cannot be denied that Old Man was a little less impassive than usual. He stretched out to Davenport a hand as horny as the hide of an alligator. Ikey's appreciation of the quotation led to a supreme effort on his part to produce a supper which should be worthy of his renown. To his great disappointment, however, Davenport fell asleep before it was ready, and Old Man had no appetite, which, considering his recent performance with knife and fork, was not altogether surprising. But Ikey felt disgusted, and showed his disgust pretty plainly.

"Wouldn't you be wore out if you'd pitched on your head?" Old Man inquired. "Not but what," he added, "it 'ud take more'n that to make a hole in your skull. You let me alone; I've got some hard thinkin' to do about which end of the horn we're comin' out."

When Davenport awoke at early dawn, roused by the twittering of a bluebird in a lilac bush by the doorway, Old Man still sat by the fire, head in hands, with the look of one mentally revolving momentous issues.

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CHAPTER III.

“ WILKS.”

DAVENPORT got up with an amused conviction that his wanderings in search of fortune or competence were about to terminate. Life in an English village had not been particularly enlivening, for there was a stolidity about people who worked on his father's land which scorned all disturbance save by local events. Kingdoms might rise and fall, emperors be born or die, but provided beer and bacon and “baccy” and wheaten bread were forthcoming at stated times, the English rustic remained sublimely indifferent to the march of events in the outer world. This bovine stolidity had appalled Davenport. He was tired of beer; the wine of life seemed a far more tempting beverage. For nearly a year he had wandered about quaffing this nectar, always good-humouredly,

and with the conviction that its flavour would never pall upon him. After all, money was not everything; true, it meant power, but muscle meant power also, and he was undoubtedly very muscular. Old Man and Ikey did not appear to suffer from any undue anxiety to become wealthy; in fact, there was a certain ordered leisure about their existence which proved that, so long as they had sufficient money for mere material wants, they preferred to pass philosophic lives rather than spend anxious nights and laborious days in the accumulation of wealth. Why Old Man should have assisted in the "holding up" of the Springs coach was a mystery. Doubtless he would give his reasons when the time came for so doing. Meanwhile, however, Old Man appeared to be puzzled. His brows contracted, he chewed the ragged ends of his moustache ferociously, as if making an unsuccessful effort to eradicate them.

Gradually becoming conscious of Davenport's scrutiny, Old Man relaxed the rigour of his wrinkled brow.

"I kin gin'rally tell when any one's a-lookin' at me," he observed cheerfully.

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"It used to be handy when I was diggin'. I shoot jest as well under one arm as if t'other feller stood in front of me."

"Wish you'd teach me how to do it," Davenport said, getting up and looking longingly out at the sweet morning.

"'Tain't a matter of teachin'," declared Old Man; "its predesternation. That's what it is — predesternation! If you're predesternated to hit t'other chap, you'll do it; if t'other chap's predesternated to hit you, he'll do it; an' the Coroner's Jury gin'rally brings it in accidental death."

Davenport looked round the cabin, but failed to see any of the toilet appurtenances of civilization.

"Can I have a wash?" he asked somewhat diffidently.

"Sartinly," said Old Man, with a magnificent wave of the hand, implying that the laws of hospitality forbade his noticing the squeamishness involved in such a request.

"But I don't see any place," remarked Davenport.

Old Man led him to the back door, flung it open, and pointed in the direction of the Ottawa shore.

"Thar's the river; that's big enough, ain't it?" he asked, and went back to his cabin.

"But soap and—and towels?" urged Davenport, following him to the door.

Old Man was genuinely amazed. "Soap! Towels! Ain't the sun a-shinin'?"

"Ye-es."

"That'll dry yer, won't it? What more do yer want? You kin git plenty of sand for soap."

"Ah, I hadn't thought of that."

Davenport nodded gaily to Old Man, but that worthy, feeling that he had been unnecessarily harsh to a stranger unacquainted with the personal etiquette of the Ottawa Valley, dived into a cupboard and produced a piece of stuff, rough enough to have scraped the hide off an elephant.

"You kin try this," he said, doubtfully. "Me an' Ikey don't like it, but you kin try it. 'Tain't my fun'ral."

He resignedly returned to the cabin as Davenport caught up the towel, threw it over his arm, and started towards the wharf.

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Davenport walked in the direction of a sandy cove, with a soft shelving beach, which melted into the brown flood. Above him was a high bank, apparently leading up into an orchard. To the left, the little town, with its glittering tin-roofed Catholic church, lost itself in dense masses of Bush. On the opposite shore, the Laurentian Mountains uprose to heaven in sombre majesty, their numberless pine branches—

"With palms upturned to the air,
Breathing a myriad prayer."

Green willows lapped the river as it flowed against the mountain side, or eddied round multitudinous little islands in mid-stream. At this early hour not a soul was to be seen, and the young man committed his clothes to the sympathizing care of a pair of Canadian robins, which had built their nest in a bush some three feet up the bank. Though the sun beat down upon Davenport's head, the water was intensely cold; its chill embrace speedily dissipated the ill-effects of his fall from the coach, and after a ten minutes' swim, he emerged from the water, feeling as if the misery of that eventful night must have happened ages ago.

The friction produced by Old Man's ossified towel nearly took the skin off his bones. A much pleasanter way of getting dry, he reflected, would be to bury himself in the warm sand for a few minutes. Then he rubbed off the sand with the towel, let the sun soak into him, and reluctantly donned his clothes. The morning was so fresh and sweet, the birds sang so blithely, that he felt a strong disinclination to return to a cabin still redolent of Ikey's cookery. Why should he not find out what was at the top of the overhanging bank?

Catching hold of a bush, Davenport gradually pulled himself up to the top of the bank; to the great dismay of the robins, who fluttered about him with little distressful cries, until reassured as to the amicable-ness of his intentions. Once on the top, Davenport drew a long breath, and flung himself down on the lush green grass beneath a brilliantly flowering shrub, into which little yellow-winged birds, laden with wool and horsehair, flitted every few minutes. Then he began to count the time the birds took to bring each hair, and so fell asleep.

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floated up from the dim underworld of dreams, he raised himself somewhat stiffly on one elbow as the hot sun pierced through the spreading leaves with an ardour which freed spicy odours from the adjoining plants and shrubs. Looking behind him, and away from the river, he could see that another bank dropped some four feet; he was on the top of a little plateau devoted to the growth of fruit trees of various kinds. Below him, a pleasant garden sloped away towards a house built of stone, and surrounded by the inevitable verandah. Great spreading fuchsias in green tubs stood on either side of the door; their red and purple blossoms offering seductive allurements to numberless little green humming-birds, emerald flashes of flame, whose quickly winnowing wings supported them as they hovered in mid air, their beaks thrust deep down into the hearts of the flowers. A fat cur basked on the verandah with that offensive air of proprietorship which only self-satisfied mongrels can assume. It seemed to Davenport that so beautiful a garden should not lack inhabitants, but he was scarcely prepared for the

interesting fact that two of them sat immediately beneath him, leaning negligently back against the bank. They were both feminine, to judge from their voices, which afforded the pleasure of contrast; for one was sweet, full, and clear, evidently that of a young woman, whilst the other had the shrill, rasping, raucous emphasis of middle age with, here and there, an occasional lapse into almost masculine decision. Davenport was about to withdraw unnoticed, when his name, exquisitely and richly pronounced, brought the blood to his cheek with sudden pleasure. He lay still, scarcely daring to breathe. If he attempted to move they would be sure to hear him, take him for a snake or some absurdity of that sort, and scream for assistance. Perhaps the owner of the harsh voice might possess a revolver and empty it at him for practice, with all the unreasoning promptness so characteristic of the inhabitants of this earthly paradise. The district seemed to be one in which the revolver was lord of all, a diminutive autocrat against whose fretful little bark there was no possibility of appeal. For his own part, Davenport

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much preferred to use the fist as a weapon : the after effects were not so serious. But just as he was about to crawl away, his name was again musically pronounced by the younger voice of the two.

"Davenport! Davenport! He must be a countryman of yours, Wilks. Wasn't he with the Judge when the coach upset?"

The person addressed as "Wilks" uttered a sound between snort and bark.

"I'd judge him if I got the chance," she said. "He'd look well in his own gaol a-wearin' striped trousers and breakin' stones."

"Hush-h! Never mind the Judge. What about the young Englishman? Will he stay here? An Englishman would make things lively, for the simple reason that all Englishmen are so serious."

Davenport felt that it was time to answer the query himself and end this involuntary eavesdropping.

"I beg your pardon," he began politely, putting his head over the bank. "I——"

But he had not reckoned on the appalling promptitude displayed by "Wilks" under

any circumstances. Before he realized what was happening, she reached out a huge hand, brown, large, rugged as a man's, grasped him by the neck of his flannel shirt, and flung him forward with a force which threatened to break every bone in his body. When Davenport recovered his breath, he found himself sprawling on the grass at the feet of a very beautiful girl.

"It's one of those loafing Four Corner fellers," said Miss Wilks, looking unutterable things and barely permitting her victim to breathe. "I'll learn him to come spyin' round here." After which emphatic declaration of her intentions, she began to complete Davenport's education in this respect with an assiduity which threatened very speedily to end his career altogether.

But the girl laid a restraining hand on the arm of this brawny virago.

"Don't you see, Wilks, that this isn't one of your admirers after all? It is the stranger. You are always so hasty."

With a reluctant growl, Miss Wilks released her victim.

"What did he come here for, then, Miss Sadie? Mayn't I chuck him in the

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river?" she inquired ferociously. "Mayn't I chuck him in the river?"

Davenport sat up on the grass, indignation giving way to amusement.

"I should be delighted," he said, "only I 'chucked' myself in a little while ago. I must apologize for going to sleep up there. Some one mentioned my name, and I—I came down to see about it," he added lamely.

The recollection of this involuntary descent caused a slight blush to colour the cheek of the girl. Her eyes danced with sympathetic mirth.

"I am so sorry," she said. "Mr. Davenport, you must excuse our—our hastiness. Wilks has so many admirers that she is sometimes obliged to resort to strong measures to discourage them. It was fortunate for you that she hadn't a chopper with her."

Miss Wilks blushed at this allusion to an incident which had happened many years ago, soon after her arrival in Canada, as cook to Four Corners gaol. The long and rough voyage from England had only increased her original timidity and lack of

charm. Hence she was glad to accept the situation procured for her at Four Corners, although filled with a lurking horror of prisons and prison life. When a countryman of hers died suddenly, on a somewhat rough scaffold in the gaol-yard, she began to wish that she had never left her native land; for, hearing that Miss Wilks was a countrywoman of his, and that it was she who prepared the delicate meals which softened his captivity, the murderer had requested the pleasure of her company at his obsequies. Miss Wilks, not daring to refuse this delicate mark of appreciation, but trembling with terror, stood beside the freshly dug grave in a corner of the gaol-yard, holding a dog-eared prayer-book (borrowed for the occasion) in one hand, and a black-bordered handkerchief in the other, thus adequately evincing her respect for "the deceased," as she ever afterwards called her defunct countryman.

Up to the time of that memorable experience, Miss Wilks, slab-footed, angular, with watery grey eyes, sloping shoulders, and scanty wisps of hay-coloured hair, had never known an element of romance in the sixteen

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years during which she had afflicted the officials of her native workhouse. She had been picked up by a philanthropic society and shipped to Canada, in the hope that there would be a place for her in that generous, ample-bosomed country. On her reaching Four Corners, however, the general opinion was that Canada had no room for so "witless a crittur." Miss Wilks sat on her box at the end of the wharf. "Oh, if you please, take me to gaol," was all she answered in reply to the questioning crowd. But when it was found that she had arrived at Four Corners in a semi-public capacity, as it were, *i.e.* factotum and "hired girl," to cook for the gaol-staff and prisoners, general commiseration was felt for the gaoler and his charges. "It's sorter playin' it low down on the pris'ners. Why, the sight of that scrawny, tallow-faced, ungainly female oughter take away what little appetite they've got left," said Abe Millar, as he watched Miss Wilks disappear within the frowning gates.

Miss Wilks's apparent insensibility at the funeral of her erring countryman (in reality she had been almost beside herself with

fright) tended still less to win for her the liking of Four Corners folk. She was not sociable; she kept herself to herself; and, crowning sin of all, dressed too plainly for a local taste which had absorbed its elementary ideas of colour from the prismatic hues of Indian bead-work. During her brief holidays Miss Wilks always strolled away into the Bush rather than mingle with the giddy crowd, although it was popularly rumoured that no mosquito would touch her, no horse-fly cast a passing glance in her direction. She had no friends, no aims, no ambitions, no desires, save to do her work and to be left alone. Folk from the back settlements had a lurking idea that she was an English lady of high degree, who had been banished to Canada by the English Government on account of her "homely" appearance.

Miss Wilks generally kept her temper. She lost it once, however, when a denizen of the Bush had proposed to her to share his frame-house and generally desirable, if somewhat primitive, lot. After a brief cyclonic interval of impassioned reproaches from the lady, he found himself fleeing for dear life,

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hotly pursued by Miss Wilks with a chopper. When called upon for an explanation of this Berserker fury, Miss Wilks had no explanation to offer. A blush of virgin modesty suffused her thin, sallow cheeks, and she continued chopping suet with the weapon which had so affrighted her simple wooer. The general opinion was that Zeke Ferguson had been too precipitate, and that Miss Wilks had upheld the honour of her adopted country in a highly becoming, if somewhat eccentric, manner. For the brief space of a week there was a revulsion of public opinion in her favour; and it was during that sunny interval of popular esteem that the *Four Corners News* alluded to her as the "fair denizen of a sunless clime, who now dwelt in unobtrusive perennial usefulness within our walls." Miss Wilks, indifferent to this delicate compliment, refused to subscribe to the paper; and public opinion once more veered round, leaving her as before, "remote, unfriended, melancholy, slow."

To the astonishment of everybody, a few years' residence in Canada entirely altered Miss Wilks's mental and physical

characteristics. Perhaps it was that, when Mrs. Vankleek kindly took her away from the gaol, her delight at escaping so frigid an atmosphere lent a new impulse to her development. She was no longer the shy, sallow, quiet, shrinking slip of a girl. Her "slab-sidedness" rapidly disappeared under the regenerating influences of good food, and a generous climate. It was seen that she was full of latent possibilities, of a dog-like devotion to her friends. Hence it was that she had become Mrs. Vankleek's right hand since Colonel Vankleek's disappearance. She was devoted also to Sadie Vankleek, Mrs. Vankleek's only daughter, and considered it a duty to repulse all admirers who wished to tempt away such a guardian angel as herself from the stone house by the river.

When Davenport looked up at Sadie Vankleek, it seemed to him that he had never seen a lovelier girl. She was exquisitely shaped—tall, with fine, lustrous dark hair and deep blue eyes, the long lashes of which curled upwards, as if reluctant to conceal so much beauty from

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the world. There was an innocent radiance, a light-hearted gaiety in her glance, made doubly piquant by the restraining influence of finely arched and sombre brows. The girl's oval face, the purity and regularity of her features, combined with the creamy pallor of a complexion which occasionally dimpled to rose-red, charmed the beholder into a belief that her personal beauty was the outward expression of a certain spirituality, developed and fostered by intimate communion with one who had suffered greatly. And amid all this radiant loveliness lurked the suggestion of newly awakened womanhood, of a virginal quest after the inner meaning of life itself. It was the face of a Diana who had never learned to flee—a face with suggestions of infinite tenderness in its lovely innocence, of power and proper pride of place, with finely moulded chin and short, curved upper lip, the while the nether one curled outward at the corners with the dainty sweetness of freshly opened petals. For a tall girl she was singularly graceful, with long, sensitive fingers, and shapely hands browned by the sun.

As he lay on the ground, Davenport instinctively realized that it was an exasperating thing to appear at so great a disadvantage before this beautiful girl. Had she been plain he would not have felt the situation so acutely. If he lived to be a hundred years old, he could never undo the infelicitous effect of those few fateful seconds in which he had been made so ridiculous by the brawny Amazon who accompanied Miss Vankleek.

"Have I your permission to get up?" he asked at last, feeling that he had been on the ground for an eternity instead of a few seconds. "This adventure will be a warning to me never to go eavesdropping again. First I tumble from a coach, then I am pulled off a bank, and now I am a prisoner."

Miss Wilks reluctantly relinquished her prey. As she did so, Davenport suddenly became conscious that the wound in his head had broken out afresh. There must have been a sharp stone lurking beneath the carpet of flowers, where he had lain awaiting Miss Wilks's pleasure. Sadie Vankleek also saw the wound, and was

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full of musically expressed pity, although Davenport vainly protested against her paying so much attention to such a trifle. He also added, with more enthusiasm than veracity, that it was a pleasure to him to have his head broken in the unpremeditated manner which seemed so natural to most Canadians.

Sadie Vankleek at once cut short his protestations with a wave of her hand.

"Take my arm, Mr. Davenport. Now, Wilks, run on to the house, and get a basin of water and sponge. We can't think of letting you go, Mr. Davenport, until we have stopped the bleeding."

Davenport felt that under the circumstances it would be almost inexcusable not to faint. Mute and bewildered, he accompanied his fair guide to the house and sank down on the verandah, with a dim consciousness that his head must have struck very sharply on the stones in the grass. Presently the verandah-posts swam giddily round and flew into the river. Just as he pulled them out again, they slipped from his extended hands, and all was blank. Once more he was enfolded in Miss Wilks's brawny arms,

carried to a bedroom, and undressed by her with characteristic energy. It was not until she had applied smarting balsam to the wound that Davenport revived sufficiently to realize what had happened. He wanted to get up and return to Old Man; but Miss Wilks eagerly undertook to inform that individual of his whereabouts, and grimly motioned him to sleep.

When Davenport awoke, he fancied that he was back in Old Man's cabin; for that worthy sat by the bedside, with chin on hands, and the same inscrutable air of having known all the mysteries of the universe since the beginning of time.

"How long have I been here?" he asked somewhat feebly.

"Jest about a week," answered Old Man, in matter-of-fact tones, but with a kindly glance—"Jest about a week. I told Ikey that cookery of his 'ud upset any one as warn't used to it."

"It wasn't the cookery upset me," said Davenport, weakly, trying to smile. "It must have been either the coach, or that disguised grenadier they call Miss Wilks."

Old Man nodded emphatically. "Ah,

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she's thorough, Miss Wilks is," he said approvingly—"Thorough. Nohalf-measures with her, when she takes hold of things. You go to sleep agin, an' Ikey'll come on for a spell. He's bin wonderful anxious to try some of his soups on you—thinks it's what he calls a heaven-born oppertunity; but Miss Wilks threatened to brain him, so he's contented himself with tellin' her how to do it. They're both great cooks in their way. You jest taste this, sonny." He raised Davenport to a sitting posture, and held some broth to his lips in an old-fashioned silver spoon. "Doc Higginson said you was to have it by degrees, afore you tried anything solid. You've lost a lot of blood one way'n another. That's it. Now go to sleep agin. You wouldn't like to learn to chaw now you've nothin' on your mind, I s'pose? You might begin with three or four plugs a day, jest to prevent feelin' lonely in a furrin land, so to speak."

Davenport forcibly disclaimed any intention of adopting so disgusting a practice, and fell asleep again.

"Wal, wal, to be sure," said Old Man, imperturbably. "P'r'aps 'twould be a little

sudden to begin. You'll learn a heap of things you don't know nothin' about now afore me an' Ikey's done eddicatin' you."

And with this significant vaticination, he once more resumed his favourite attitude until relieved by Ikey.

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CHAPTER IV.

MRS. VANKLEEK.

MISS WILKS, professedly distrustful of Old Man's and Ikey's capacity to nurse Davenport properly, kept a sharp eye on the somewhat erratic though well-intentioned proceedings of these worthies; and finally, being dissatisfied, took matters into her own hands, with a stern determination characteristic of one whose well-known prowess with choppers had a tendency to discourage carping criticism. There was also a delicacy about the situation, owing to the amorous relations supposed to exist between herself, Old Man, and Ikey. The inhabitants of Four Corners were greatly interested in this slowly developing love-story—a story which had been unfolding with epical slowness for the last twenty years. The betting was even that Ikey

would shoot Old Man, Old Man carve Ikey to pieces with a bowie knife, or Miss Wilks, in a fit of desperation at being unable to come to an impartial decision, decapitate them both with her chopper—that weapon of offence which, in the minds of her neighbours, bore as potent a reputation as the far-famed Excalibur of Arthurian legend. But Miss Wilks had a conscience, and that conscience smote her when she thought of the way in which she had added to Davenport's sufferings by her unpremeditated assault. Her atonement took the somewhat material shape of jellies, ornamentally emblematic of their common fatherland, and of luscious fruits and delicate cakes calculated to appeal to all the higher instincts of a man's stomach—the only god to whom the majority of men, in Miss Wilks's opinion, were capable of offering continued worship. She was filled with poignant remorse that hers should have been the hand to deal Davenport so much pain; although, it is true, this remorse usually manifested itself in a desire to make things as unpleasant as possible for Ikey and Old Man, at whom she flouted and

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flouted in a way which caused the former to writhe with anguish, although her gibes produced about as much effect on Old Man as if he had been a brick wall. Whereupon Miss Wilks, affecting to regard Old Man's indifference as wholly feigned, indulged in oratorical remarks of a nature which filled Ikey's cup of anguish to the brim, but never caused him to swerve for a moment from loyalty to his friend, who appeared to believe that Miss Wilks cloaked a consuming passion for them both which filled her days with care, her sleepless nights with woe.

Providence, fortunately for Davenport, had blessed him with a remarkably thick head; and he was soon able to write home a glowing account of the strange people who had received him among them in so inauspicious a fashion, but who, on closer acquaintance, proved to be equally ready to take him to their hearts. The only thing which puzzled him was the paltry estimation of human life which prevailed among his new friends.

"What's the good of shooting a man on sight and then finding out you are mistaken?" he asked Old Man one afternoon

when that Machiavellian gentleman looked in to inquire how he was getting on.

"Saves argifyin'," dryly replied Old Man; "an' anythin' as saves argifyin's a blessin'." He looked at the pretty furniture, the thick carpet beneath his feet, the dainty pictures on the walls. "Ain't it about time for Miss Sadie to have her room agin?"

"What? Have I——?"

"Yes. But I reckon you didn't know it."

Davenport asked for his hat. "Hadn't the slightest idea of it. I won't trespass on her hospitality any longer."

Old Man nodded. "Ikey an' me 'lowed you was sorter losin' time, you bein' wishful to get in crops this year. We've fixed on a section of land down thar by the Crick, with a bit of Ikey's Bush runnin' across the bottom. The deeds is all ready to sign on Monday, an' we'll have the neighbours in for log-rollin' 's soon as you're well enough. They'll knock up a house for yer."

Davenport was overwhelmed by this delicately disinterested kindness.

"If so be as you're short of cash," continued Old Man, his face as expressionless as a balk of timber, "me an' Ikey

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'll plank down the rest. The chap as upset the coach"—he broke into a chuckle—"an' tied you up, didn't reckon on gittin' a new neighbour out of that business. We'll jest crawl down to the Crick to-morrow, to see the site. It's more'n a hundred acres; thar's enough timber ready felled an' seasoned in the Bush to build the house, once the neighbours rolls down the logs to the saw-mill."

Before Davenport could express his thanks, Old Man stepped lightly through the window, and disappeared just in time to avoid Miss Wilks.

"Mrs. Vankleek wants to see you in the parlour," said that pugnacious Amazon, regretfully surveying the flying figure of Old Man, as if anxious to break a parting lance with him. "Miss Sadie's there, too."

The latter part of Miss Wilks's announcement was not wholly displeasing to Davenport. In all the novels he had ever read, the picturesque heroine invariably insisted on binding up the wounds of the persecuted hero; but in this case, instead of laying cool hands upon his burning brow through the night-watches, the picturesque



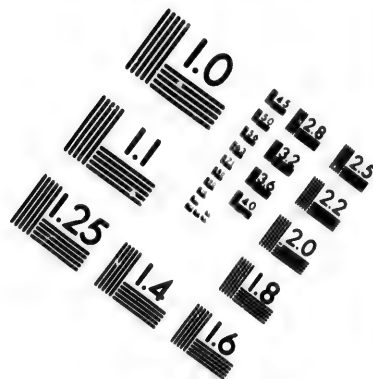
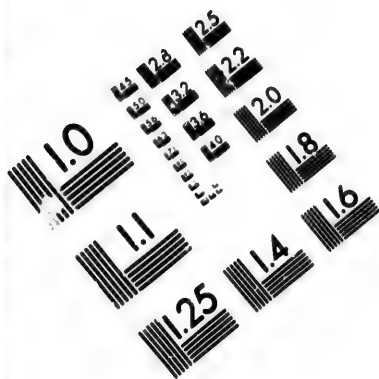
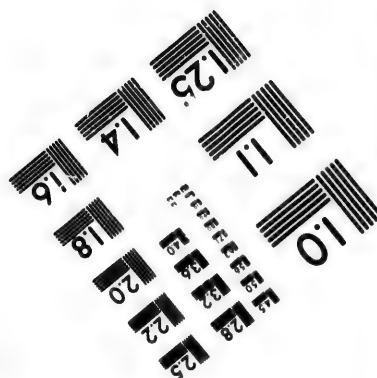
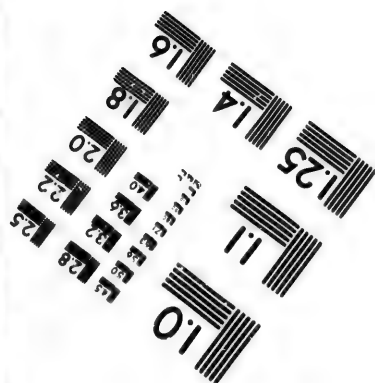
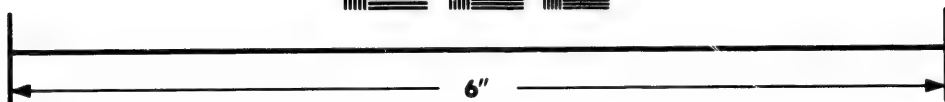
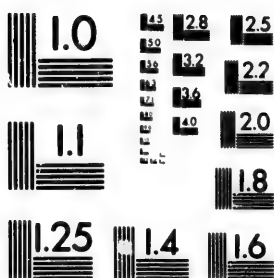


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heroine had simply confined her attentions to sending him cool, and very occasional, messages of inquiry. Davenport had long since admitted to himself that Sadie Vankleek fulfilled all the necessary qualifications for a heroine. Whether she would regard him as a hero was an altogether different thing; it seemed to him that under no circumstances could she possibly do so when she recalled the ludicrous figure he had cut in the masculine hands of Miss Wilks, who preceded him down the passage, and glared back with what she meant to be an encouraging glance.

"I've got him," she announced, flinging the door wide open, and almost dragging Davenport into the room, as if he were some rare animal which she had picked up in the Bush. Having thus introduced Davenport to Mrs. Vankleek, she thrust her arms akimbo, and prepared to take part in any discussion as to what ought to be done with her captive.

"That will do, Wilks. You can leave the room," said the elder lady's peremptory voice; and Wilks, with an indignant toss of the head, departed.

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Whilst this short conversation was going on between Wilks and her mistress, Davenport noticed with pleased surprise that there was not the slightest resemblance between Sadie and her mother. In the present state of his feelings he would have resented any apparent likeness between the two. He wished to think that there was nothing in earth, or sky, or sea that betrayed a personal affinity with Miss Vankleek ; she was complete in herself—so rare and beautiful a being that he wished to place her on a pedestal of his own, where all comparison should be impossible. He was conscious of shaking hands with her before the elder lady crossed the room. Then, having introduced him to her mother, Sadie departed and left them alone together. It was some consolation to Davenport to think that, in passing by his chair, Sadie had insisted on placing a peculiarly soft cushion beneath his wounded head.

After a few polite expressions of regret at the mischances which had befallen him, Mrs. Vankleek almost insensibly turned the conversation into another channel. It struck Davenport that she was particularly

eager to learn every detail of the accident to the Springs coach; she even smiled slightly with humorous appreciation as he described the woebegone expression on the Judge's countenance in the early dawn.

"It is not often that a judge himself is judged. You are quite sure that the deeds were all taken away?" she asked presently. "There can be no mistake about that?"

"I don't think there could be any mistake. It is impossible not to know the crackling of parchment. The robber, whoever he was, took one or two deeds out of the box, as if to identify them. Then he went off with the whole lot."

"And what was he like?" Mrs. Vankleek eagerly inquired.

Davenport declared his inability, owing to the darkness of the night, to describe the road-agent.

"I had a vague impression that he was tall; but I was so confused that I couldn't be certain about anything. Now I must thank you for your kindness, Mrs. Vankleek, and return to my friends."

Mrs. Vankleek smiled. She was still an extremely handsome woman, and the smile

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was not without its charm. Davenport explained that he had already imposed sufficiently upon her good-nature. Mrs. Vankleek contended that she was still his debtor, and that he must consider himself at liberty to stay as long as he liked. If he elected to live in the village, she trusted that he would not neglect the opportunity of meeting her half-way in a desire to make things pleasant for him. She also hinted that the society of Old Man and Ikey, though doubtless sufficiently agreeable in itself, could scarcely take the place of all that he had left behind him in England. In return for this frankness Davenport hastened to explain that he was the son of an English gentleman-farmer, whose family was better than his farm, and who made it a rule, when his children attained their majority, to give them five hundred pounds apiece, and politely kick them into the world to fare for themselves. He talked freely of his prospects, and how he intended to settle down and adapt his English experiences in horse and cattle breeding to the requirements of this almost virgin Canadian soil.

Davenport went back to his room with the conviction that Mrs. Vankleek, despite a certain imperiousness of manner and the shortest upper lip he had ever seen, was kindness itself. He understood her anxiety to know what had become of the deeds to the property, and also detected her carefully hidden satisfaction when he mentioned the misadventures which had befallen Judge Ducaine. Unless the Judge, who had wooed Mrs. Vankleek so obstinately and long, could produce the deeds, his threats of foreclosing an alleged mortgage on the property were futile. And, from what he had already seen of Ducaine, Davenport felt convinced that, as long as passion, pride, or prejudice were concerned, he would stick at nothing. Obviously, therefore, Mrs. Vankleek had obtained a temporary respite. Hence her eagerness to know who had taken the deeds. Davenport did not feel himself at liberty to hint at the nature of his suspicions with regard to Old Man's share in the transaction. That worthy would probably take his own time to explain matters. Until then one might as well question the Sphinx.

Three days after this interview Davenport returned to Old Man's hut, escorted thither in triumph by his two friends, and bearing under one arm a cake as big as a tombstone, the peace-offering of Miss Wilks. The cake also contained a true-lover's knot composed of sugar-icing, the object of which was to render Ikey frantic with jealousy, and cause Old Man to lose his reason from despair. Unfortunately for the success of Miss Wilks's design, Ikey simply thought the sugar-icing a Masonic emblem meant for guest and hosts alike, and devoured most of it himself with great gusto, although not without experiencing certain disastrous after-effects, owing to Miss Wilks having mixed the sugar-icing with plaster of Paris to stiffen it. As for Old Man, he paid no attention to Ikey's groans, but silently handed him the whisky-bottle, and cut a huge chunk off the cake from the flakiest part of its yellow heart, to the secret delight of Miss Wilks, who, by some fortuitous chance, happened to be passing at the moment. As Old Man sat on his stool by the door, eating her cake, "*pro bono publico*," to quote his own

expressive phrase, it seemed to Miss Wilks that the situation almost amounted to a proposal. If she could have seen the grin on Old Man's face when he shut up his clasp-knife, she would not have felt quite so certain. From motives of his own, Old Man had temporized with his friend the enemy, knowing that Ikey was far too engrossed with internal disturbances to make any objection. He would rather have cut off one hand than willingly give pain to his faithful follower and friend.

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CHAPTER V.

LOG-ROLLING.

WHEN the people of Four Corners threw off their habitual listlessness they did so with a determination which indicated great capacity for latent work. Every team for five miles round came in with a joyous party of hands for the log-rolling. Buggies with spidery shafts, carts with huge blocks of wheels made from solid wood, nondescript vehicles drawn by oxen and mules yoked together in picturesque incongruity, buckboards which jolted their occupants up and down with every movement of the fiery little ponies—all these hurried towards Ikey's Bush or encamped in picturesque confusion around the site of the new house, for which the foundations had already been laid. Old Man declared with emphasis that no trouble was to be spared. In

pursuance of this spirited policy, he went round dropping appropriate hints.

"Now, boys, let this yer Britisher see what you kin do when you're roused. They do say men are pretty spry over in the old country, but I reckon none of 'em knows how to tackle Bush, an' open it up, like we do. Here's Old Tollevnts, with his five pretty gals, over thar; an'," he whispered confidentially, "Tollevnts has got his eye on the workers to-day. I sha'n't be s'prised, mind you, if he was to say to himself, 'You'll do for Lucinda Jane.'"

Whereupon the athletic youth to whom Old Man addressed himself would buckle to with redoubled ardour, and perform prodigies of work under the stimulating glances of the Tollevnts family.

"Tollevnts," more familiarly known as "The Deacon," had a wearisome habit of beginning every remark with "At all events," which had gradually softened down into the above contraction. He considered himself a member of the Church militant, carried a big revolver, and was equally ready to fight a man first and convert him afterwards. Tollevnts's iron-grey

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hair floated loosely over brawny shoulders ; his eyes were as piercing as a hawk's. In addition to the customary costume of Four Corners, he wore a long-tailed black coat as an outward indication of spiritual privileges denied to customary mortals. The effect of this, in conjunction with pants tucked into his boots, slouch hat, and occasional exclamations scarcely of a diaconal character, was rather startling. In unison with these peculiarities of costume, Tollevents regarded heaven as a place where he would ultimately be received with the respect due to a deacon who had for so many years consented to abide in such a village as Four Corners. After living at Four Corners, he had been heard to observe, the prospect of entering another world had no terrors for him ; it could not be worse, and it might be better.

When every one had reached the Bush, Tollevents raised a gaunt hand in the direction of the hurrying crowd, and motioned it to stay. With one hand on his revolver, the other raised to heaven, he breathed a militant prayer, concluding with—

"O Lord, bless these yere peaceful petitions of Thy servants (Jake Stebbins, if you don't stop grinnin', I'll let drive at yer), an' grant we may taste of the fruits of the yearth now bein' opened up, so as in due time we may enjoy the Indian corn, an' the punkin, an' the garden truck of Thy promised land. Amen.—'Lish Higgins, you're pinin' for a lammin' afore the day's over; you'll git it, if you don't leave my gals alone. Now then, boys, we'll begin." He paused in confusion, for mastery of detail was not his strong point.

"You was sayin'," suggested Old Man, who had already arranged everything long before Tollevents took matters in hand—"You was sayin' the teams had better git the logs down to the saw-mill at once, afore we fires that patch. Now we'll haul out the stumps, an' tidy things up a bit."

Tollevents nodded affirmatively, and Old Man, having persuaded the Deacon that his was the master-mind which arranged everything, marched off to endue some one else with a similar belief.

"Thar'll be a frolic in Tollevents's barn when we winds up this yer picnic," he said

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to the younger men. "I shouldn't be s'prised, now, if Lelota and Melinda hurries the old man off to bed, so's to git him nicely out of the way. You kin reckon on a good time gin'rally, boys, if you puts in a fair day's work. We've been knockin' Davey Davenport about since he got here; it's time we did somethin' to help him. You could put your fist through the hole in his head."

Thus moving from group to group, Old Man, faithfully duplicated by Ikey in another part of the lot, stimulated and encouraged every one with lavish promises of that gift for which his soul most craved. There was a genial benignity about Old Man which would have softened the heart of a crocodile, as he approached a party of women and girls who were industriously bringing provisions for the workers. But, to Old Man's dismay, he suddenly recognized a tall female form towering above the rest; in one hand it held a chopper.

Old Man turned to flee, but was too late, for Miss Wilks had already seen him, and, with a coquettish motion of the chopper, waved him to come nearer. He

cast a furtive glance round to see if Ikey was anywhere near, but that faithful henchman had already started with the teams.

Old Man breathed a sigh of relief. He did not wish to hurt the feelings of his friend by a *tête-à-tête* with Miss Wilks. But Miss Wilks had her own notions of what was due to her, and was also in possession of the field.

"Some folk," she remarked, with withering scorn, "haven't the gumption to pass the time of day."

"Some folk," basely returned Old Man, "when they sees other folk, gits so mixed up they don't know what time of day it is. You couldn't oblige me with the time, Miss Wilks?"

Miss Wilks softened visibly, although perfectly well aware that she did not possess a watch, a fact of which Old Man was equally cognizant. She affected to be oblivious of this remark, and inquired after Ikey with tender solicitude.

"He ain't well," Old Man replied, allowing a shade of concern to steal over his features. "No, he ain't well. He was eatin' the white stuff on that cake of yourn,

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an' it upset him in the night-watches. I had to git up an' rub him with opodeldoc, his langwidge was that awful. 'Sides, he seems to have suthin' on his mind."

Miss Wilks started guiltily. "You don't mean to say that nat'ral-born innocent eat the letterin'?"

"In course he did."

Miss Wilks remembered the plaster of Paris and held her peace, feeling that she had slain the only man who ever loved her.

"He said them solid chunks of whitenin' 'ud have to be dug out of him when he died," continued Old Man; "an' I was to send 'em back to you with his best respex, he'd no more use for 'em; they'd done for him. He's better this mornin', though."

"If ever there was a looney," said Miss Wilks, reverting to the accent of her native workhouse, "it's that Ikey. Without you to nurse him, he's bound to git into mischief."

Old Man saw his opportunity. "Ah, if you only knew what a soshoble kind of crittur he is, an' how lonely he sometimes gits, Miss Wilks! I couldn't tell you what

that man's said about you in the night-watches."

This was strictly and literally true, for Ikey had so far forgotten himself, whilst suffering from the effects of the Parisian plaster, as to use language which would have made a mule blush. He attributed his misfortunes to an attempt on Miss Wilks's part to cut short his career from motives of professional jealousy. How else could it be that Old Man had also partaken of the cake and yet escaped without a single pang?

"Ikey's nat'rally unfort'nate," continued Old Man. "He had the chalk; I got the cake."

"And the pie?" queried Miss Wilks, conscience-smitten. "Did the pie sit easy on him?"

"He wasn't a bit the worse for all he swallowed of it," diplomatically stated Old Man, quite forgetting to mention that Ikey had hurled the pie through the open door. "Who's that with the long hair a-talkin' to Miss Sadie?"

"That? Oh, a poetry feller from the Swamp. 'Skeeter Joe,' they call him.

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He's always pesterin' Miss Sadie with his poetry. I'll poetry him some day," added Miss Wilks, suggestively fingering her chopper, as if the road to Parnassus could only be reached after she had reduced every local Milton to mincemeat. "But if I stand talking to you all day, there'll be nothing for anybody to eat."

She gave the huge cauldron a stir, and Old Man hastily made his escape, lest the fleshpots should prove too strong a temptation. Crossing the lot, he entered the Bush just in time to see Ikey heading a procession of teams to the saw-mill. As the leading team consisted of an ox and a mule, it took some time to get the first log down to the Creek, whence it was floated to the mill pond, run up in a trice, placed upon a kind of carriage, and drawn towards the saws. A few seconds later, that which had once been a log fell into evenly-cut-up planks; these, in their turn, were seized upon by a hundred willing hands and hurried off to the carpenters, who nailed them against the uprights of Davenport's rapidly rising house.

When Davenport tried to help, he was

good-naturedly pushed aside by a brawny son of Anak. He would have quite enough to do later on, as soon as the house was ready for him, the giant declared. Meantime he had better sit by the mill dam and keep out of the way of incoming logs.

Davenport left the good-natured crowd, and sat down by the mill dam. There he remained somewhat listlessly watching the water slowly trickle through the cracks in the huge logs. The scent of the freshly sawn lumber was grateful to his nostrils, the whirring bands of machinery made pleasant music. He felt drowsily conscious, as he sat there with the balsamic odours of cedar and pine ascending to expectant nostrils, that a house was rising up for him, through the labour of others, with all the magic celerity of Aladdin's palace. He already saw himself lord of fat oxen and fiery steeds, surrounded by smiling fields and fertile meadows, the rolling river at his feet, and on the opposite shore the giant Laurentian Mountains, whose eternal summits welcomed alike the white man and the red. It was good to live, to be conscious of returning health, to walk erect in

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the sunlight, feel the dewy air of night, see solemn stars, inscrutable and serene, drawing him upward to nobler ends and aims than the mere struggle for daily bread. Let it be his to know the love of men and women alike, the touch of baby hands, the rapture of full days, the—— The droning hum of the huge revolving bands lapped his senses in drowsy forgetfulness. Half unconsciously he slid behind a fragrant pile of sawdust and slept, a smile upon his lips, whilst the tears of the mutilated pines diffused themselves in health-giving fragrance around him. "We die, O brother, that you may live, and thus fulfil our task."

But whilst Davenport slept, real forms gradually drew nearer, escaping from the heat of the day into this cloistral gloom, through which little motes of sawdust floated and fell. Bending down, the poet of the Swamp, familiarly known as "Skeeter Joe," on account of his indifference to those irritating insects, scooped away the sawdust for Sadie Vankleek.

"Here we kin—I mean can—sit and talk, Miss Sadie," he said bashfully.

Sadie sat down, casting a look at the

youthful poet through her long-lashed lids, which completed the subjugation of that inflammable being. He responded to it by scooping out a seat for himself at her feet.

"I'm not worthy to sit on a level with you," he declared.

"Why not?" Sadie knew perfectly well, but it was her humour to affect ignorance of his meaning. "Why not?" she asked the shy, long-haired poet, whose emaciated cheeks and thin form told a tale which would have grieved the heart of any mother.

The poet looked up at the whirring bands above him. "Something's wrong here," he said, placing his hand on his chest; "and I ain't ready for it."

"Ready for what?"

His eyes shone with preternatural brightness through the gloom.

"It ain't—I mean, I'm not—like other folk, that's a fact. This cough's tearing me to bits just as I'd found out what it is to live—just when I'd learnt the forms of the flowers, the whispers of every wind, the sigh of the streams, the sweet birds' song. I've read in olden books of ancient knights,

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and ladies with golden hair a-shining down to their feet; and I've waited for 'em to ride through the Bush and take me by the hand. Sometimes in the Fall I've seen 'em coming through the maple leaves; but 'twas only the reds and yellows of the frost. The nearest I've ever been to 'em's when you've come down to the Crick, singing. I've tried to put it into words—words as'll make people feel kinder sorry for me, and say, 'If that chap had lived, he'd have made folk laugh and cry.' In a few months, maybe, they'll cry—some of 'em—but they won't laugh. I've often wondered what it was like to lie underground, hearing nothing, not even the patter of a chipmunk's feet on the leaves."

A fit of coughing interrupted his words.

"But I didn't bring you here to tell you all this," he said, leaning back, pale and exhausted. "'Tain't in nature you'd ever love me. Somebody else's sure to come along by-'n'-by. I've tried to git—I mean get—that infernal old editor of the *News* to print my poems; but he gave the last lot to the office goat, and said they made him sick. What I wanted to tell you was,

I hung round your house t'other night, and there was another feller doing the same thing."

"Who was it?"

"An oldish man. I'd never seen him before. He dove into the Bush when he saw me."

"But what were you doing there?"

"Looking up at your window," artlessly rejoined the poet. "I could see your dark shadow on the blind when you stretched out your arms. They looked so round and supple and sweet as the sleeves fell away from 'em, I wanted to climb up and kiss the blind. I've often wondered what a girl's room—the room she has for her own—was like. Seems to me it must be kind of restful, and part of herself, with pretty fixin's—a place for prayer, a beautiful bower where she pours out her soul to God. If I could have felt one of them arms, so pretty and white and warm, around my neck just for a moment, nothing else would have mattered in the whole world."

Sadie's hand dropped caressingly for a moment on the young enthusiast's shock of hair.

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"You mustn't talk such nonsense," she said kindly. "Every knight has to go out into the world to win his spurs. Some day, perhaps, you'll become a great poet."

The poet shook his long locks. "Whiles I'm riding away to tilt against Death on his white horse, there's sure to be another feller here who'll get the inside track." (He did not know that Davenport still slept within a few feet of them). "But I'm bound to start in a day or two, and ramble round on the old mule, trying to get my pieces printed. I fetched you in here just to tell you I'm starting, and to get you to promise, when the time comes, you'll not forget me."

Sadie made a little gesture of pain. "My dear boy, you mustn't talk so. You know how much I like you."

"Liking ain't love," somewhat drearily said the poet. "A man wants love, not liking. When all those fellows in the books started out, they never knew what the end was going to be. I do know. That's why I asked you to have this little talk with me. I've never had much in my life to brighten it, or make me happy; I've

always been a solitary, moping owl, with more kinship to bees and flowers than human beings. Then you come along, and it was different. I ain't going to howl that God might have made things easier for me. I've had my doubts about there being a God at all, till I met you. Now I know there must be one; the devil couldn't create a girl like you. Maybe God's so busy with all His millions and millions of sinful, suffering folk, He can't give me more'n an odd minute now and again, and that's how I've got wrong."

He sat there, looking up into her beautiful eyes with strange wistfulness.

The girl sorrowed for this playmate of her youth. She knew that he spoke the truth; that she had no love for him, such as he desired; but she bent over him, put her arms around the lad's neck, and pressed her lips to his with infinite tenderness, infinite pity, infinite pain.

"When you come back, tell me you have forgotten all this," she said. "If you cannot come back, promise to send for me."

Davenport, drowsily coming forth from behind his rampart of sawdust, surprised

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the two. With a slight flush on his cheek, he passed on and hastened out to the log-rollers, who worked whilst he slept. He seemed to spend most of his time in sleeping since he had arrived at Four Corners.

The poet looked after him somewhat enviously.

"There's a man," he said; "handsome, straight, tall. Nothing the matter with him that a week or two won't put right. Things are hard for some people."

"Come into the sunlight," said Sadie, confusedly; "the gloom is bad for us both."

But the poet shook his head as she left the mill. He went further back into the gloom, still feeling the exquisite wonder of a woman's kiss upon his virginal brow.

"My! what it would be to live for that!" he cried to the whirring bands above him.

"To live for that!"

CHAPTER VI.

TOLLEVENTS'S BALL.

IN the course of the next few days, and at a comparatively small expenditure of ready money, but a vast amount of good-natured energy on the part of the neighbours, Davenport found himself in possession of his new home. As the roof was not yet shingled, he slept in one of the lower rooms for the present. The weather was perfect, the sky a cloudless blue. The wound in his head had healed rapidly. Every morning, as he rose from his bed, the young Englishman felt that it was good to be alive, a pleasant thing to wander forth and smell the sweetness and fresh savour of this fair land. Truly, that fall from the coach had been a fortunate thing.

Davenport was not alone in the new house, for Old Man and Ikey had consented to confer on him the benefit of their society,

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provided that they should be allowed to return to their own hut whenever they felt inclined to do so. They also felt it incumbent on them to give out a public intimation in the post-office that any attempt to take advantage of the stranger's "greenness" would have unpleasant results for a person so lacking in tact as to imperil the honour of Four Corners. In consequence of this notice, Davenport had some painful moments when purchasing stock.

"Did I understand you to say you had the all-fired impudence to want ten dollars for this yer alleged three-legged heifer?" Old Man would ask an intending vendor. "P'r'aps you think we're goin' to lift your mortgage for you. The right price is five. Jest think it over, now. Five dollars, eh?"

Something in his eye usually induced the would-be fraudulent seller to state that he meant five dollars, but that a curious slip of the tongue had caused him to misstate the amount. As a result of this paternal supervision, Davenport bought good animals at proper prices. He was a much better judge of cattle than Old Man.

"You pick out the beasts you want,"

said that worthy, "an' I'll attend to the domestic details in buyin' 'em."

The "domestic details" which required attention from Old Man generally caused tricky sellers to depart in a hurry, looking, to quote Ikey's phrase, as if his friend had been "rearrangin' 'em, an' forgotten to mend their garments arterwards."

When the roof of his new house had been properly shingled, Davenport received a formal invitation from Tollevents *père* to be present at a "frolic" in honour of the occasion.

"You'll see some fine gals, Stranger," he said. "Tollevents, the five finest are my own, it bein' the will of the Lord to afflict me with gals. I shouldn't be s'prised, now, if your bein' chucked from that coach was a providential dispensation to take one of 'em off my hands. If you'll give me your brindled heifer you can have your pick of——"

But Old Man broke in with a hasty statement that the brindled heifer was suffering from all the ills that cow-flesh is heir to, and succeeded in preventing Tollevents from renewing the subject.

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Tollevents's barn had been swept and garnished for the occasion of the "frolic," which was his euphemistic way of describing a country dance. Tollevents himself was not officially present, his religious scruples preventing him from personally countenancing the proceedings. Unofficially, he superintended them from the hay-mow, with a bottle of whisky and a Bible, drinking in the contents of both when his watchful eye was not roving from person to person on the floor below. In the midst of the festivities, people were startled by hearing a revolver-shot. The alarm quickly subsided when it was found that the Deacon kept watch and guard in the hay-mow, and that an undesirable aspirant to the honour of an alliance with the house of Tollevents had had the tip of his ear grazed by a bullet.

"W—what's that?" asked the frightened youth, clapping his finger to the place, and preparing to bolt.

"That? Oh, I guess it's only Pa," said Miss Tollevents, coolly. "I s'pose he thought I wanted a lock of your hair, Jim Peters, and that you'd danced enough with me for one evening."

"I left my revolver in the committee-room," muttered Mr. Peters, "or I'd soon have him out of that hay-mow by the tail of his coat. It's a mean trick of the old man's. He converted a feller down at the Crick t'other day by threatenin' to blow the top of his head off if he didn't go down on his marrowbones an' own to bein' a mis'erable offender. What's the good of that kind of repentance anyway? I'll——"

"It's nearly time for his next shot," calmly remarked Miss Tollevants. "Pa generally allows three minutes when he gives a hint. Clear out now, and I'll meet you to-morrow at the usual place. Quick, quick! Back behind me; get down towards the door. Then he'll understand that you understand. There's the Coroner over there sizing you up already."

Peters hastily beat a retreat, muttering that the time would come when Tollevants should pay for his shot. As he went out he ran against Davenport, who had consulted Old Man with regard to the etiquette appropriate to such an occasion. "You bein' a stranger," that worthy observed, "you did orter put on a little style so's not

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to disgrace your native lan' when the thing gits into the papers. You don't happen to have a clean shirt about an' a black coat?"

Davenport electrified Old Man by showing him his linen and clothes. Instead of being pleased at the sight, Old Man mournfully shook his head. "You'll be makin' enemies if you come out in this style; an' I mayn't be by to look arter you. Jest take my advice; keep 'em locked up. Don't wear white shirts an' collars 'cept on Sundays an' dances. Me an' Ikey don't wear white shirts, or we wouldn't be alive now. Folk round here think 'em kind of pretentious. Thar was a man round here once as come to a log-rollin' with a white collar on." He paused.

"And what became of him?"

"The Coroner set up drinks with the fees," gloomily responded Old Man; "but thar warn't no taste in 'em arter such a low outrage. You tone yourself down as much as possible, or you'll be on my mind all the evenin' an' Miss Wilks 'll git ahead of me. Nobody 'd say nuthin' agin a red tie, or somethin' light an' green; but no

clawhammer, mind you, if you don't want the tails shot off."

As a result of Old Man's advice, Davenport's attire was singularly sombre, to the great satisfaction of the younger men, who saw in him a possible rival for the hand of one of Tollevents's fair daughters. These young ladies, who had been brought up on strictly Puritanical principles, now resembled a bed of variegated poppies as they stood in one corner of the barn awaiting the arrival of swains bold enough to come within range of their belligerent parent.

Old Daoust, the blind French fiddler in charge of the music, sat on a barrel in one corner, serenely oblivious of the fact that the tallow candle in a tin holder just above him guttered down his back. Every one felt ready and anxious to begin, but no one cared to do so before the arrival of Sadie. Sadie was the belle of the place; and whoever was fortunate enough to secure the first dance with her would be a privileged man for the rest of the evening.

To the astonishment of every one, Mrs. Vankleek accompanied her daughter and Janie Ducaine, the bosom friend of Sadie.

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That is, the two girls quarrelled three or four times a week, and became reconciled five minutes after they had vowed never to speak to each other again. Janie Ducaine was a blonde, with a weakness for philosophizing on the wickedness of old men in general, and young ones in particular. This did not prevent her appreciating the attentions of the latter with a zest which somewhat displeased her more reserved friend; for Janie Ducaine had little of the austere demeanour of the Judge, her father. Janie had never known a mother's care; but the big-hearted Irish immigrant, to whom the Judge had confided his infant daughter, worshipped the child, and imbued her with that laughter-loving humour and tenderness so inseparable from Milesian blood. Janie was full of romance, scornfully disbelieved all stories to her father's discredit, and loved Mrs. Vankleek with passionate devotion. The tragedy of Mrs. Vankleek's life, the disappearance of her little child (it had been mysteriously brought back to the grief-stricken mother a few weeks later, when it seemed as if her brain must give way), and the devotion of the

Judge to the widow, all combined to invest Mrs. Vankleek with a halo of romantic interest in Janie's eyes. Mrs. Vankleek was so handsome, so melancholy, so faithful to the memory of the missing Vankleek, so haughtily obstinate, and yet gracious withal, that Janie never ceased to admire her father for his constant devotion to one whose dignity of demeanour matched his own. That hard things were said about the Judge; that his reputation for loving money was notorious; that he was harsh and severe, did not detract from her father's greatness in Janie's eyes. He must be different from other men, or how could he judge them? If he had faults, who was perfect? and where was a handsomer man, or a better parent, in the whole of Canada?

Mrs. Vankleek declined to dance, but was secretly pleased at the chivalry with which Davenport approached her on the subject.

"My daughter will take my place," she said graciously. "Presently we can sit in the moonlight. I want you to tell me about your English home."

Davenport offered his arm to Sadie, and

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led her away, conscious that "Skeeter Joe," who had apparently postponed his departure, glared ferociously at him in a most unpoetical manner. The poor poet, unable to deny himself a last glimpse of the lady of his love, failed, in his turn, to notice Janie Ducaine's wistful eyes. The girl, seeing him lonely, haggard, and ill at ease, crossed over and sat down beside the lad, overflowing with sweet, womanly sympathy for this poor moth, fluttering round a flame, the light from which could only consume him.

Thus left alone, Mrs. Vankleek, after observing that her charges were enjoying themselves, and pitying the blind fiddler, who could not see how beautiful they looked, walked through the open door into the cool moonlight. It was long since she had frequented festivals of any kind. Now she remembered, with a pang of bitter pain, how the path led down through Tollevents's pasture into a patch of Bush beyond. The centre of this patch of Bush contained a little sheet of water known as the Dragon-fly pool, owing to the myriads of those beautiful insects which hovered over its

clear surface in early summer. A spirit in her feet—the spirit of her lost youth, her lost hope, her lost happiness—led Mrs. Vankleek back to the pool; through dewy grass, spangled with fireflies and fragrant with flowers, the stems of the pines standing sentinels arow, the scarred branches maimed and jagged, and bending beneath the burden of their years. In the old times, when she and Love walked hand-in-hand together—when the days of her life were a dream of delight—she had run down the uneven path, lightly leaping fallen trunks, her cheeks aglow with happiness, her eyes aflame with the joy of meeting her lover—that lover as arrogantly imperious as herself, as overbearing, as keen to win the mastery. How swiftly their frail bark had foundered on the contentious rocks of matrimony! How soon their hopes of happiness departed! And why? They had been too much alike ever to yield to one another. This was the sole secret of the misunderstanding which had robbed them both of home and happiness, the joy of mutual comfort and support throughout the battle of life.

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Mrs. Vankleek sighed when she came to the water's edge. Full many a time and oft she had wandered round the edge of the pool on such a night as this. Now the clear water seemed black, dim as the dark days of her own disappointed life. Her lips quivered; she fell on her knees by the rushy margin of the pond, and prayed with passionate tears, not for happiness, but peace. Happiness was such a shadow, such a fleeting, flouting will-o'-the-wisp. Oh for a little rest, a little slumber, a folding of tired hands to sleep; a forgetfulness of daily pain, of all the fever and the fret on life's highway! Her starved heart cried aloud to Heaven, her uplifted hands beat the air, the tears ran down her face; but there came no sign save the sighing of the pines, no answer to her prayer except a little ripple on the placid surface of the pool. The branches came between her and the sky. They shut her out; they barred her prayers; they rubbed gently together, shedding their resinous balm to mingle with her own salt tears. "Not yet—not yet," they seemed to say. "A sign! A sign! Perchance it shall be given thee. Wait!"

As Mrs. Vankleek knelt there in the moonlight, a black lace scarf floating loosely over her hair, there was nothing but the more fully rounded outlines of her beautiful form to betoken the flight of time. The scarf mercifully hid a few threads of silver hair; in the soft light filtering through the trees she seemed almost girlish again. Not a wrinkle showed upon her brow; the lips retained their old imperious fulness and beauty, and the dark shadows under the eyes only lent a softer fire to those brilliant orbs—a tender sadness to her proud face. She had been deserted by her boy-lover and husband. Only if he were dead could she take up the threads of life anew and weave them to fresh issues.

At this moment a man emerged into the little clearing from the shadow of the trees on the other side. Mrs. Vankleek could not distinguish his face, for he wore a very full-flowing beard, which covered it with iron-grey masses of hair. The tip of his cigar burnt redly as he strolled round the pool, and hesitated for a moment when he saw that Mrs. Vankleek had sprung to her feet and was regarding him somewhat uneasily.

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"A pleasant evening, madam," he said, bowing courteously, and throwing his cigar into the pool before she could interpose to prevent him. "I see that you, too, have quitted the ball-room for Nature's softer scenes."

He bowed again, and was about to pass on, when she stayed him by a movement of her white hand.

"I think I had the pleasure of seeing you in the ball-room a little while ago?" she asked, pointing in the direction of the barn.

He bowed again, as the sound of old Daoust's fiddle floated merrily towards them.

"Colonel Francis G. Burr, at your service," he said, with the slightest possible American accent. "I am spending the summer at the Springs, and looked in at the dance to-night to see an old friend. May I ask to whom I have the pleasure of speaking?"

Mrs. Vankleek explained; the stranger's pleasant manner—it was evident that he was a polished man of the world—overcoming her reserve. Besides, she wanted to escape the memories which she had

conjured up, to lay the ghosts of bygone years. With a somewhat cynical smile, she lingered by the side of the pool, trying to put herself and the man beside her back some twenty years. He was handsome still, from what could be seen of his face; his bearing was that of a graceful cavalier; but, unfortunately for the success of her fantastic idea, he was the wrong man. That other man, impetuous, hot-headed, imperious, overbearing as herself, yet full of strangely sweet and gentle impulses at times—where was he?

She sighed and moved away, Colonel Burr accommodating his steps to hers, his long hair floating picturesquely over his square shoulders. In spite of her seclusion from the world, in spite of her wrongs, Mrs. Vankleek experienced a thrill of pleasure at the Colonel's grave deference. He had been suffering from the effects of an ugly arrow-wound received in a brush with Indians on the Plains, and intended to make the Springs his headquarters for some time to come. On the whole, if his physician insisted on his drinking the waters, he would prefer to let the arrow-wound do its worst. There was

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a vulgarity, if he might speak of so delicate a subject, in consuming such vast quantities of liquid, no matter how harmless it might be.

They had twice circled the pond, the Colonel still hat in hand, when Mrs. Vankleek remembered her duties as chaperone. She turned towards the gloomy clumps of pines, the Colonel gravely pacing by her side. Suddenly, a shot rang out from the dense masses of shadow, and a lock of the Colonel's grey hair, cut by the bullet, wavered a moment and then blew gently towards Mrs. Vankleek.

When she recovered from her alarm she was alone; and the thud-thud of a horse's hoofs going at break-neck speed through the Bush smote upon her ear. She picked up the lock of hair and waited.

Presently the Colonel returned, smiling, debonair, apologizing for his abrupt departure. "The fellow had a good horse," he said, "or I should have caught him. I could have shot back; but I make it a rule never to draw a weapon in a lady's presence. Shall we return to the ball-room?"

Mrs. Vankleek smiled imperiously. This

was a man! "Colonel Burr, that was a hint from the Fates for you to avoid me in future. You will do well, for your own sake, to profit by it. Sorrow and misfortune guard my poor threshold."

The Colonel smiled. "Madam, when the Fates sever a thread, they generally place the ends in the hand of a woman to reunite. I see that you honour me by retaining the end cut away;" and he pointed to the lock of hair which she still held. "May I beg of you to keep it until I ask for it again. It will prove an important link in a certain chain of events."

Mrs. Vankleek bowed in silence, took the Colonel's arm, and re-entered the barn, only to find that she had not been missed by either of her fair charges.

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CHAPTER VII.

MISS WILKS'S LOVERS.

THE evening after the dance at Tollevants's barn, Miss Wilks unexpectedly entered Mrs. Vankleek's room and found her quietly weeping as she gazed at a certain portrait on the dressing-table. From the garden below came the mirthful voices of Sadie and Davenport discussing the incidents of the ball, which had continued with unabated vigour until the small hours of the morning. There had been a glorious walk home together in the dewy moonlight afterwards, and much interchanging of youthful confidences. Now, a certain reaction had set in; they talked of extra-personal subjects with a suspicious affectation of interest. Mrs. Vankleek, sitting at the dressing-table, felt their voices stab her. She was lonely,

tired, aching for sympathy, yet too proud to seek it. The weary passing of the years had broken down her pride. She wanted an arm to rest upon—some one to share her burdens.

She put down the portrait with a sigh. From behind her came a sympathetic sniff in response. "Wilks, what are you doing here?" she asked sternly. "Haven't I told you always to knock?"

"I don't care," said Wilks, defiantly. "It's no use pitchin' into me. I can cry if I like, can't I? I've troubles enough and to spare. It makes 'em worse when you're crying too."

"How dare you, Wilks! Leave the room." But as Wilks continued to cry, Mrs. Vankleek softened at her evident distress. "I didn't know you were in trouble, Wilks," she added gently. "What is the matter?"

Wilks's reluctant tears stayed themselves as if by magic.

"It's all them two men," she said, with a giggle. "They both wanted to dance with me at Tollevants's, and carried on most marked; and I'd no one to take care

of me, or to make 'em careful what they said before me."

Mrs. Vankleek smiled. The mere possibility of so athletic a female as Wilks needing a chaperone had not occurred to her.

"You've always the chopper, Wilks," she suggested. "People say you carry one about, ready for emergencies."

To her surprise, Wilks burst into another torrent of tears.

"That chopper's been my ruin," she said. "Every one's afraid of it now. Old Man says you know how many times a gun 'll go off, but you never can be sure of my chopper. I'm sure I'm peaceable enough when they let me alone. If I only lift my little finger, some one tumbles down, and says I did it."

Mrs. Vankleek smiled. "Ah, you're like the rest, Wilks. You stay with me a little, and then want to go away. You, too, are tired of me."

Wilks was at her mistress's feet in a moment, red-eyed, incoherent; eloquently, if somewhat jerkily, protesting that she never meant to leave her mistress until

Mrs. Vankleek was perfectly happy, and that even then she wouldn't go far. Then she rushed forth to the river-side to escape the too inquisitive looks of her fellow-servant, and jumped down the green slope—into the arms of Colonel Burr, who was sauntering along with the inevitable cigar in his mouth. Being an old Indian fighter, the Colonel was not wholly taken by surprise; but the impetus of Wilks's charge carried her over him like the rush of a tornado. Picking himself up and carefully dusting the sand from his clothes, he gazed at her with a sardonic smile.

"Perhaps you would have the goodness to hand me my cigar when you've quite done with it," he suggested blandly. "If you prefer to keep it sticking into your jacket—it's burning a hole—say so, and I will light another."

Miss Wilks plucked the cigar away, and held it limply between her fingers. A note in the stranger's voice awoke some chord of memory; it fascinated her. She rubbed her eyes in a bewildered manner, scorched her fingers with the glowing end of the still burning cigar, gave

a loud snort, and sat down on the sand in a bony heap.

"I don't think I would do that if I were you," the Colonel blandly protested. "It isn't at all dignified."

Miss Wilks got up again. "I'm sorry," she murmured, in a dazed kind of way.

The Colonel produced a small flask from his revolver pocket.

"Allow me," he said, delicately unscrewing the top. "A little of this—this harmless beverage—may enable you to pull yourself together."

Miss Wilks, as she stood gazing at the Colonel, presented so flaccid and disjointed an appearance that it seemed as if no amount of human tinkering could ever have the slightest restorative effect upon her. She dropped the cigar on the sands, and thankfully gulped down the contents of the flask without stopping to take breath.

"You had better have a little water with it," suggested the Colonel. "Wait a moment, I'll get you some."

Miss Wilks eagerly drank the water from the little silver-plated cup, which surrounded the bottom of the flask. But in her haste

she again caught her breath, and became limply purple, iridescent hues glittering over her visage, strangely resembling the varying tints of a freshly caught mackerel.

"You really are so precipitate, Miss—eh?—Wilks," remonstrated the Colonel. "Pardon the liberty if I venture to pat you on the back. It may help to restore you to a world which could ill spare your majestic presence."

Ikey, who had been fishing the other side of the river, stopped in mid-channel to witness this unceremonious proceeding on the part of the Colonel. Then he dashed for the shore, full of indignation at what he imagined to be Miss Wilks's perfidy.

"Now, may I ask," continued the Colonel, when Miss Wilks's complexion had faded from a rich dark purple back to its natural brick-dust hue—"Now, may I ask, Miss Wilks, the reason of this flattering, though extraordinary demonstration?"

Miss Wilks ungratefully regarded him. "I took you for some one else. Thought you were a ghost. It was a mistake."

The Colonel somewhat ruefully rubbed his forehead.

"If I had been a ghost, I shouldn't have had this bump here. Pardon me for so ungallant a simile, Miss Wilks, but your head is like a battering-ram."

"Yes, I'm only soft here"—Miss Wilks pathetically put her hand to her heart—"and I pay for it."

The Colonel was politely interested. "With so charming a mistress, madam, I do not see why you should be unhappy. Permit me to apologize for my rudeness in running against you just now. Perhaps this ten-dollar bill will help to repair the damage to your originally becoming, and becomingly original, costume."

Miss Wilks took the ten-dollar bill with an air of bewildered incredulity. "Why, I only paid four dollars the year before last for it."

"That leaves six dollars for the skill required to renew it to suit your idiosyncrasies," returned the Colonel, with a bow which Miss Wilks thought the most fascinating she had ever beheld. She did not know what "idiosyncrasies" meant, but felt that they were some personal charm evidently not bestowed upon mere ordinary mortals.

"So you thought I was a ghost?" sardonically remarked the Colonel, when Miss Wilks had blushinglly tucked away the ten-dollar bill in the bosom of her dress.

Miss Wilks hesitated. "It's a long time ago," she murmured confusedly. "He wasn't so broad, he wasn't; and he'd different hair—red, not grey."

The Colonel listened to her patiently. He had nothing to do except to recover from the effects of his wound; and Miss Wilks's disjointed remarks helped him to pass the time.

"If I could have red hair in order to oblige you, I would do so, Miss Wilks. It is not every one who can preserve the colour of the hair so well as your mistress."

Miss Wilks became enthusiastic. "It's lovely, ain't it?—as glossy and dark and thick as ever it was, with only a few grey hairs here and there to mark the tears."

Colonel Burr's hand gave a nervous twitch at his cigar. "Tears! Is it possible—pardon my presumption in asking, Miss Wilks—that your mistress can have anything to weep about?"

" 'Tain't only possible, but 'tis so. All because she was jest a little high-spirited, and wanted her own way."

"A lady's privilege, undoubtedly," mused the Colonel.

"He went away, and left her without a word. If he'd only come back," said the belligerent Miss Wilks, "and let me have five minutes at him with my chopper, he—he'd never go away again."

The Colonel had no doubt about it. "I should think it extremely likely, Miss Wilks, whoever the individual in question may be."

"Her husband." Miss Wilks plunged into domestic details. "He wanted Miss Sadie to be a girl; she wanted her to be a boy. He went off without waiting to see which it was; and then the baby was stolen, and afterwards brought back again."

The Colonel endeavoured to follow Miss Wilks's somewhat incoherent statement, but with imperfect success. "*He* was Mrs. Vankleek's husband, I presume? And he was disappointed about the sex of the—of the impending child? Was that it?"

Miss Wilks nodded, forgetting her

native caution. "And *he's* been at her ever since to marry him," she said, waving her hand in the direction of Ducaine's house, a mile below.

"Who?"

The Colonel again put his hand to his forehead, upon which a large red bump was distinctly visible. Miss Wilks's rapid changes from one "*he*" to another became confusing.

"Judge Ducaine."

"Though I am a stranger here, I have heard as much," the Colonel replied, flicking the ash from his cigar. "Now, Miss Wilks, strictly between ourselves, don't you think it time that some one came along to show up this scoundrel, Ducaine, and horsewhip the life out of him?"

Miss Wilks gave a little cry of delight. "That's it! That's it! That's what I want to hear him called. Lay your tongue to it, Colonel, and ease my mind. I've often done it myself in the garden, but I was always afraid she might hear me, and not like it." In her eagerness, she laid one huge hand upon his sleeve. "You can fight?"

"I have that reputation. The Indians of the Plains call me, 'The-Man-who-Fires-a-Gun-Backwards-without-Looking-behind-him-and-never-Misses.'"

"Indians! Yah!" Miss Wilks sniffed scornfully. "The Judge's slipperier than any Indian as ever drank whisky."

"Could you procure me an interview with your mistress?" asked the Colonel warmly. "I might be able to help her against this fellow. Why hasn't any one else done anything? Are they all cowards about here?"

"You see, he's judge and jury too. They're all afraid of him."

"Fix this up for me, and you'll never regret it. You may rely upon me to help her against this villain. I'm pretty sure that it was Ducaine who fired at me the other night."

In her eagerness Miss Wilks paid no attention to this last remark, but again laid her hand upon his arm.

"I b'lieve my mistress is dying of grief. If I could only find that mis'erable husband of hers, I'd bring him back here and make him go down on his knees. She's never

looked at a man since he went away; not for all these years; and she might have married dozens if she'd wanted to. He's nothing to her now; he's no right over her. She's her own mistress, if he comes back to-morrow. Ah, if he only would!"

"I guess thar's quite enuff people about as isn't wanted, 'ithout any more comin' back," said Ikey, thrusting himself between them as he came noiselessly up from the shore. "Now, Colonel, or Gin'ral, or whichever it is, me an' Old Man don't allow no liberties with this yer harnsome woman."

The Colonel said nothing, but looked vaguely round the horizon, as if in search of the young and beauteous maiden referred to. Something in the gleam of his eye awoke Ikey to the sudden knowledge that he was making himself ridiculous; for, in truth, Miss Wilks, no longer in the first flush of youth, had almost imperceptibly attained that majestic prime which extorted so much unwilling admiration from Old Man. It was a new sensation for Miss Wilks to hear herself championed as beauty in distress—a sensation which caused her

to beam upon the Colonel with maidenly archness.

"Say, Colonel, what's to be done with this yer object? It's allers followin' me about, and listenin'."

The Colonel's eyes quizzically travelled over Ikey's sunburnt features, his faded garb.

"I think, if I were you, I should have it repaired and redecorated," he said, lighting another cigar, altogether regardless of the fact that Ikey's hand stole ominously towards his hip-pocket.

"That's right," said Miss Wilks to the latter. "'Twould take a long time to do it, though. Ikey, if you don't dry up, and leave me alone when I'm talkin' to friends, I've no use for you. Is that straight?"

Ikey flushed. "That's straight enuff," he said slowly; "but I ain't arguin' with *you*. You jest clear out. Me an' Old Man, havin' matterymonial designs on you, so to speak, he looks arter you when I ain't round, an' I looks arter you when he's out o' sight."

"What!" screamed Miss Wilks, the truth beginning to dawn upon her. "Was

that why Arkis Bludso gave up comin' to see me?"

"Prezactly. Two broken ribs an' a bullet in his arm."

"And Sol Cummins?"

"Old Man downed him into the Crick. The catfish was very fine in consequence last year," retorted Ikey.

"Silas Laphal?" screamed Miss Wilks, rapidly revising her list of lovers.

"He found it wasn't healthy round here. Me an' Old Man fitted him up with a wooden leg, an' let him go to the States."

"George Cass? You might have left a looney like Cass," pathetically remonstrated Miss Wilks. "He was as harmless as a tater-bug."

"Oh, we tied him to a mule, an' started him home agin. He don't seem to have turned up yet. Old Man's sorter suspicioned that mule must have taken to the river, an' couldn't quite git over."

Miss Wilks was aghast at the disclosure of this hideous conspiracy. No wonder her court had diminished, when these two inexorable ruffians were always on the watch, with never-failing ingenuity and readiness

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of resource, to eliminate all present and prospective admirers.

"You'll be startin' *me* off somewhere next," she said.

"I *did* think it was the best way," Ikey retorted; "but Old Man said no. He wouldn't hear of it. Told me we'd best keep you here as a sollum warnin'."

Miss Wilks nearly fainted with rage. "And which of you two wants to marry me?" she asked, coming to the point with a vigour which elicited a smile from the Colonel, who had made no attempt to defend himself during this animated discussion.

"We ain't yet made up our minds," said Ikey. "When we do, you'll hear from us."

Miss Wilks tittered ominously. "And which d'you think I'd better choose?"

"You won't choose," said Ikey. "When Old Man's made up his mind, he'll let you an' me know."

"S'pose I don't agree with him?" suggested Miss Wilks. "S'pose I don't fall in with these high-handed purceedins—this marrying of helpless young women 'ithout their consent, Mr. Marston? What then?"

"'Tain't no use talkin'," answered Ikey, in his most matter-of-fact way—" 'Tain't no use talkin', when you know you'll jest have to. When Old Man makes up his mind, why, the thing's got to be done for sure, an' that's all about it."

"But," said the Colonel courteously, "I gathered from your conduct just now that you also are a suitor for the lady's hand."

"Don't make no diff'rence," Ikey announced. "Not a mossle of diff'rence. I mostly 'spicions it's Old Man she wants. What he wants, we shan't know till he wants it. Now, Colonel, if you'll ask this yer lady to retire, we'll settle our little affair up in the Bush yonder. You git ahind one tree, I'll take another; best out of three shots to end it. I reckon I kin double you up in two," he added critically; "but you might take three to sorter finish you off, if the light's bad. Or"—he brightened up at the idea of displaying his prowess before Miss Wilks—"if she likes, Miss Wilks can stay an' hear your testamentary dispositions."

"But suppose I kill you?" asked the

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Colonel, not at all dismayed by Ikey's vigorous programme.

"Then Old Man'll be down on you," answered Ikey. "It bein' my duty, when Old Man ain't round, to keep an eye on Miss Wilks, I sees her foolin' with you. Well, we settles it all fair an' square, an' if anything happens to me—which it won't—Old Man comes along with his sixshooter to resoom the discussion. Now, Colonel, if you're quite ready, we'll let Miss Wilks git, an' wade in."

Miss Wilks made a sudden grab at the collar of Ikey's shirt, and held him in her bearlike hug. "Don't you interfere, Colonel," she implored. "Don't you interfere. Three minutes is all I want to lay him out. Three——"

But the Colonel laid a restraining hand on Miss Wilks's arm, and freed the astonished Ikey. "Come with me this way a moment, Mr. Marston," he said. "I have something to tell you—something which Old Man knows also."

He drew Ikey aside, and whispered something in his ear. Ikey staggered back in surprise, and then began to grin. "It's

all right, Miss Wilks," he said to that lady, who was altogether perplexed by this sudden change of front. "It's all right. I poggles—'umbly poggles. Speakin' for me an' Old Man, individually an' collectively, you kin hug the Colonel all you want to if he don't mind. He's on the free list."

"And the others?" queried Miss Wilks, not at all gratified by this generous permission.

"Thar won't be any others, not till Old Man makes up his mind," quietly retorted Ikey. "If thar is any others, d'reckly the symptoms gits pronounced you may say good-bye to 'em. Under the circumstances, if I was you—which I ain't—I shouldn't think it worth while to lure 'em on."

For the first occasion in many years, a sense of helplessness overcame Miss Wilks. At the same time, life promised to be less monotonous than before. She immediately resolved to give this self-appointed committee of Ikey and Old Man all the work they could possibly do as an Amatory Vigilance Society; and, to this end, appeared at church in great splendour of

attire on the following Sunday, only to be met by Ikey in the porch after the service was over.

"'Tain't no good," he whispered quietly, looking at a knot of men who stood by the church-gate. "'Tain't no use at all. Old Man's give out an altrymatum to 'em; they daren't see you home, to save their lives."

"Then you'd better do it," suggested Miss Wilks, with a toss of her head. "You're homely to look at, but you're better'n no man at all. Come on."

"Which was my intentions," answered Ikey, opening the gate for her with elaborate politeness.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE RING.

AFTER the judicial labours of the day were over, the Judge was wont to make a pretence of listening to his daughter Janie's somewhat tinkling tunes on her mother's harp. The late Mrs. Ducaine, during her brief married life, had harped uninterruptedly. The Judge's enemies said that she was a saint, who hid her martyrdom with music; for it was notorious that he had married her in a fit of pique against Mrs. Vankleek. Janie, following in the maternal footsteps, also deemed it her duty to play to the Judge every evening, though her music had about the same effect on him as the lap-lap of the river against the piers of the wooden wharf at the bottom of the garden. It was there, and it would not go away. Sometimes, however, it

soothed Ducaine's restlessness, extracted the sting from his secret care, put a better complexion on the world in general, and inspired him with fresh hope that Vankleek might never return to claim his wife. That which he had feared so many years ago had actually happened. The supposed widow worshipped the memory of her harum-scarum, ill-tempered spouse. When the Judge had suggested that he should assist in the worship, in order that Mrs. Vankleek might not feel lonely, she had repulsed him with scorn. Whether he chanced to be dead or alive, she was wedded to Vankleek. It was an insult to his memory even to suggest that he could be replaced. She refused to admit the probability of Vankleek's having obtained a divorce in the States, so that he might wed some one else. He had always been hasty, but never base. It was probable, she insinuated, with a haughty curl of the lip, that people who were not hasty, and who kept one particularly useless object in view for many years, were sometimes base.

This particular evening, the Judge sat

on the verandah, absently watching a belated humming-bird as it vainly endeavoured to extract a supper from the blossoms of the huge fuchsias in tubs which guarded the steps. It had been a particularly trying day; the intense heat stretched his nerves to their utmost tension; and there was a stifling, suffocating feeling about, which even unlimited iced drinks could not wholly banish. Presently a low rumble of distant thunder indicated that a storm was brewing on the other side of the river.

In the pasture below the garden, Ducaine's cattle moved restlessly about, too much perturbed to feed, whilst a rooster on the fence crowed lusty defiance to the coming tempest; but as the heat grew greater and eddying dust-clouds choked his clarion notes, the bird also began to droop, flopped limply down from the fence, and sought the society of his harem, the members of which had already gone to roost, leaving their lord and master to brave the elements until he grew tired. There was a little tapping together of branches amongst the bushes, a darkening of the distant sky, low, ominous

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wind-soughings amid the tree-tops. The surface of the river began to break into crisp little miniature waves, harmless and pleasant enough to look at, until the Judge noticed the way in which a small boat rocked upon them, as its occupant made for the shore. The wind drove down a gorge from the opposite side of the river, and swept the little cockleshell before it like a feather. Whilst the Judge idly speculated whether the rower could swim or not, and what would happen if the frail craft's head slewed round, a wave struck the little boat, and swamped it. As it disappeared, the Judge hoped that it contained either Ikey or Old Man; for those worthies had been a constant and unceasing annoyance to him for many years past. Whether they were shot, or lynched, or drowned was utterly immaterial to him, provided that something unpleasant ultimately ended their careers. The only reason that he did not issue warrants for their arrest on a charge of robbing the coach was that, though morally certain of their guilt, he had not a particle of evidence on which to lay an information before a brother judge.

Janie's tinkling music ceased as she hurried away to shut the window and divest herself of any ornaments likely to attract electric currents. The Judge threw open his waistcoat, unbuttoned his shirt at the throat, took a long drink from a huge tumbler at his elbow, and watched the vivid lightning zigzag through the air to the sullenly following accompaniment of rumbling thunder. It was too late now to drive the cattle into the yard; they were cowering uneasily together under a huge, scarred cedar at the bottom of the pasture. Should the lightning strike that particular tree, the result would be disastrous. The Judge could see a favourite old bull patrol round the trembling herd, his front clothed with thunder, his eye flashing back the lightning. Moved by an impulse of fellowship for the magnificent beast, he stepped off the verandah as the first pitter-patter of the rain tapped on the shingled roof, and went bare-headed through the garden to drive the cattle home. Before he had gone half-way across the pasture, however, the storm increased, and drenched him to the skin; at every step, the water ran out

of his boots; he had to crouch down and let the force of the wind break over him: whilst the undaunted old bull threatened the thunder, and challenged the lightning to do its worst. Presently, to Ducaine's amazement, the whole herd of cattle, headed by the bull, began to move towards the house. A few moments later, the lightning struck the tree under which they had sought shelter. Every now and then the bull turned and viciously charged at a man with a long pole, who was driving him towards the yard. The Judge anxiously watched for the next lightning-flash, in order to see the new-comer's face. What manner of disinterested fellow-creature had taken all this trouble for an unpopular judge, and also risked his life to insure the cattle getting safely home? If the stranger escaped the lightning, there was the bull; if he avoided the bull, who should protect him from the lightning? The next flash settled this question, and left the Judge more perplexed than ever; for the new-comer was one of the very men of whom he had been thinking a few moments before. Old Man had braved the

perilous night in order to save his enemy's cattle, and was rapping the bull on the nose in a most scientific manner whenever that unruly beast made a break, accompanying each hit with maledictions on the Judge for not knowing enough to take in his cattle when the heavens are let loose, and even wild beasts remain in their lairs until the storm is over. The Judge felt himself to be comprehensively wet, but Old Man seemed wetter—a kind of human cataract in miniature. In fact, the only dry thing about him was his humour, as he drew comparisons between the animal and its master.

“You,” he said, addressing the bull, as he headed it off for the twentieth time—“You don’t know enough to git away from a tree when it’s goin’ to be struck; an’ he don’t know enough to git away from a woman as looks thunder an’ lightnin’ at him every time he comes anigh her. You’ll both have your hides tanned before long, if you ain’t pretty careful, you bellowin’ bull of Bashan, you. Take that, you son of a gun, an’ be thankful I let you off so easy.”

With a final rap on the nose, he drove

the bull into a yard and fastened the gate.

"Now to treat his master in the same way," he muttered grimly. "Wonder whether he'll go rampagin' round to the same extent! Dunno which has the thickest head. He must be pretty wet by this time, if he's still out there in the pasture. The dum fool, to think as I can't see any one on the darkest night, rain or shine."

"Come in and change your clothes, and have some whisky," said the "dum fool" in a voice of suspicious blandness, wringing the rain out of his own wet shirt. "I ought to have known better than to leave the cattle out on such a night as this."

Old Man nodded. "You did," he said with uncompromising directness. "You did ought to ha' known better, Judge. Guess your man was pretty drunk over t'other side of the river, so I thought I'd look in an' see whether that black bull was all right. He's always made it so lively for me when I'm crossin' your pastures that I don't want his joysome little excitements cut short by a thunderbolt."

The Judge hardily knew whether to thank

Old Man for such expressive candour or to tell him to go to the devil and take the bull with him; for that obstreperous beast, indignant at the treatment to which Old Man had subjected him, charged furiously at the yard-gate and expressed in bovine language his opinion of an adversary mean enough to keep him at arm's length with a long pole. Old Man, leaning on the other side of the gate, within six inches of the bull's nose, continued to talk to Ducaine without paying the slightest attention to the exasperated animal.

"I'd come in, if I were you," suggested Ducaine. "Two more charges like that will lift that gate off its hinges; we can't run far in our wet things."

"No more can he, Judge; the ground's too soft," retorted Old Man, unabashed by another charge from the bull, which broke one hinge and nearly wrenched the gate down.

He nodded with friendly tolerance to the excited animal, and went with the Judge towards the house, without even looking round to see whether the bull's last charge had smashed in the barrier.

"You're soaked," said Ducaine, abruptly, as they entered the verandah, leaving a long wet trail behind them.

"Oh, that was when the boat busted, an' I had to swim for it," replied Old Man. "A few drops more or less don't count when a man's bin in the river."

He followed the Judge to a spare room, and presently emerged clad in a grey tweed suit which hung in loose folds around his spare frame.

"I'll send down for my duds to-morrow, Judge. The storm's pretty well over now."

"Nonsense, man, nonsense," said Ducaine, with bluff heartiness. "Keep the clothes and welcome. Here's the whisky. Better have a tumbler neat to keep out the wet."

Old Man nodded. "'Tain't at all a bad idea, Judge. It'll have to cover a lot of ground though; I'm drippin' clean through." He gulped down the whisky admiringly, and shook himself like a water-rat.

"Good stuff, eh?" the Judge asked. "Have another?"

Before Old Man could make a feint of protesting, he refilled the tumbler and

hospitably set it in front of his guest, who swallowed the fiery contents with a sigh of satisfaction. In a trice, Ducaine had again replenished his glass.

"Drink square, Judge," said Old Man, immediately perceiving Ducaine's object. "Stuff like this goes a long way."

The Judge hospitably pooh-poohed Old Man's mock scruples. "Nonsense, nonsense," he said jovially. "Any one could drink a gallon of this whisky after such a soaking. It's as mild as a pet lamb, and gentle as a humming-bird. You must keep the wet out of your bones, man."

"Glass for glass, Judge," said Old Man, gaily yielding to the challenge, with a confident faith in his own powers to drink down Ducaine or any other mere mortal man.

The Judge was equally certain that he could "down" Old Man, and pump him with reference to the "holding up" of the coach. As the hours flew by, it appeared probable that Ducaine was about to effect his object; for Old Man became foolishly loquacious, and talked at random. It seemed to the Judge as he fetched another

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bottle of whisky, made a boisterous pretence of drinking, and urged Old Man on to fresh efforts, that the full confession was only a question of time. Do what he would, however, it became impossible to fix Old Man's attention on the coach episode. He continually harked back to the time when Vankleek had gone away some twenty years ago, and the possibilities of his future return. In spite of his precautions, the liquor mounted to Ducaine's head. Had Old Man been in a condition to profit by his adversary's rambling revelations he might have put two and two together in a manner which would have left little room for doubt as to the real author of the discord between Vankleek and his wife. But, to all outward seeming, Old Man was too stupidly drunk to pay much attention to what the other said. Ducaine felt a kind of savage relief in freeing his soul from its burden of crime—a burden borne in silence for so many years. The man gloried in his infamy. The only bar to his success was that he could not put any financial pressure on Mrs. Vankleek with regard to her mortgaged property as he was unable to produce the

necessary deeds—those deeds which had been stolen from him when the coach was upset. He made large offers to Old Man to induce him to find the missing documents; and, in fact, promised to interest himself with Miss Wilks, with a view to her becoming Mrs. Evans on the day that Mrs. Vankleek doffed her weeds. Old Man listened to all these outpourings of incautious villainy with a befuddled manner, which completely allayed Ducaine's suspicions. He admitted, with an air of drunken candour, that he had no idea who had taken the deeds; but that it might be within the bounds of possibility to find out, provided no inconvenient questions were asked.

It was eleven o'clock before Ducaine would consent to allow Old Man to leave. Janie, reassured by the unusual merriment below, had gone to bed a couple of hours before. She drowsily woke up on hearing her father's voice bidding Old Man farewell, and, slipping softly to the window, saw that worthy slouch away through the dewy sweetness of the fresh summer night in his usual deliberate manner. The enormous quantity

of whisky he had taken had failed to make the slightest impression on him. As soon as he turned the corner, he shook himself, with an expression of disgust at having missed the loveliness of the night, and sat down on a log to admire his new clothes.

"He can't say I stole 'em," he mused; "for Miss Janie's window went up as I said good night; she heard him tell me he hoped I'd live long to wear 'em. Wonder whether there's a spring anywheres about."

He hunted round for a little, found a pure, sweet spring, and drank eagerly. When he had plunged his face and hands into the clear water, he went back to the log, stretching out his arms to the cool night air, and listening with intense satisfaction to the creeping, pattering things of the darkness as they rustled through the undergrowth. A snake slid over his feet, paused a moment by his hat, which he had thrown on the ground, and then glided away, a momentary gleam of moonlight falling on its glossy back. The long wet grass was full of tiny insects, with tiny voices uplifted in rejoicing at the rain. Now and again a night-bird flitted by on

velvet wing, its harsh voice momentarily silencing the myriad insects in the grass. The Bush, so silent by day, was alive with bird and beast, the nameless piping voices of the night, and on its outskirts thousands of fairy firefly-lamps lit up the cool gloom. Old Man sat drinking it all in—the beauty, the majesty, the ineffable rapture of the night—with the joy of a truant child. Presently the force of old childish habit became too much for the gravity of his years. He drew off his boots and socks, and dabbled bare feet in the grass, at the same time upturning the palms of his hands against the beating breeze. When he had satisfied this pantheistic rapture, he slung the boots over his shoulder and crept noiselessly back to the house. Worming himself up on the verandah with the dexterity of a snake, he pushed his face against the window and looked in.

Ducaine sat motionless at the table, his eyes fixed upon a plain, thick gold ring which lay there. The table was wet with little pools of whisky; three or four tumblers—one of them broken—were scattered over its polished surface. Here and there were

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little moist circles where glasses had been moved from time to time. The ring itself lay in the centre of the table, the black background of a whisky bottle showing off the colour to advantage as Ducaine gazed at it with fascinated eyes. Once he raised his hand to touch it, then drew back in fear. Presently some overmastering impulse bade him put forth his hand to assure himself that the ring was a reality and not conjured up by whisky. He took it up, held it to the light, laid it down again, and recovered from his fright.

"Pshaw!" he muttered. "There are many gold rings in the world. That scoundrel, Old Man, must have left it behind him by mistake. Stay, though, I didn't see him wearing it."

He again picked up the ring and put it on his finger. It fitted perfectly.

"So be it," he murmured. "Vankleek is alive and has remembered the old compact. Why didn't the fool shoot me without warning? Now I am ready for him whenever he appears on the scene. All the time I was pumping Old Man, he must have been chuckling in his sleeve"—"Your sleeve,

Judge," softly murmured Old Man at the window—"and getting ready to leave that ring on the table when we went out. That was why he insisted on following me. I should like to have a few minutes with Old Man—just a few minutes—in the Bush some day when the scoundrel was unarmed. I dare say he's loafing round now to enjoy the scare I've had."

He moved silently to the window and stepped out; but Old Man had disappeared with magic celerity. Ducaine hurled the ring away with an oath, and went in again. He knew the worst. Vankleek was alive, and thirsting for revenge, but too chivalrous to take him unawares.

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CHAPTER IX.

THE MEETING.

MISS WILKS noticed, with much inward perturbation, that Mrs. Vankleek no longer scorned the pomps and vanities of this wicked world in obedience to St. Peter's injunction, that women should adorn themselves with shamefacedness and sobriety, and not with brodered hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array. The great shining coils of her blue-black hair, here and there tinted with little soft delicate lines of grey, were wound about her head and secured by golden-hilted pins of gleaming tortoise-shell; they gleamed duskily out from beneath the black lace worn, mantilla-wise, over these lustrous masses, each thread of which had once served to enslave the susceptible Colonel Vankleek. Stray suggestions of colour appeared here and there on her black dresses

—touches of scarlet or orange, which blended with them, and delicately suggested that the time of mourning had been succeeded by the ineffable calm of Indian summer. Beneath the dusky olive of Mrs. Vankleek's cheek the blood mantled as of yore; her listlessness disappeared, and the grief-stricken woman's magnificent vitality reasserted itself. Life's summer had been spent in tears; now that autumn approached, he flew to drag her from the chilly arms of woe, to reawaken a desire for life, to send rich torrents of blood pulsing through every vein, and drive back thin shades of hopeless grief to that dim underworld, where unrequited love lies sleeping nor wakes to wooing kisses of sweet maids. The harsh asperity of sorrow gave place to pleasant words; a smile played about her lips; she sang soft snatches of old plantation songs, and drank in the sunshine like an imprisoned butterfly which has just escaped from its cell, spread its light wings, and stretched them in the vivifying air.

Miss Wilks noticed this change in Mrs. Vankleek with lurking disapproval. She had been used to the panoply and livery of

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woe for so long, that any alteration in it seemed unbecoming. Her first liking for Colonel Burr speedily turned to rooted distrust, for he seemed to pervade space, to be ubiquitous, to appear at unexpected moments when she did not want him, to put her suggestions aside with a lofty politeness, which made this grim Amazon long for her chopper, the seclusion of the lonely Bush, and an emphatic interview, with no one by to stay her hand. But the Colonel appeared to be wholly unconscious of her jealousy; he was perfectly lavish with largesse; and Miss Wilks's attire at this monied period of her career would have put that of many a squaw to the blush, owing to her fondness for certain crude and violent colours. Blue, red, yellow, and purple largely predominated in her costume; she had even been heard to ask for gloves at the village store; but this rumour was not believed, inasmuch as people knew very well that the size of her hands would necessitate the manufacture of a special sort. When this rumour reached Old Man, he was reported to have said that he should be sorry to see Miss Wilks wearing gloves, as

such unnecessary adjuncts to her ordinarily striking costume were calculated to spoil her splendid freedom of action, should she be called upon to adjust any little dispute between Ikey and himself. On this being reported to Miss Wilks, she immediately forswore gloves, and publicly announced that Old Man had more sense in his little finger than Ikey would ever possess in his whole body. Old Man heard of this comprehensive statement from his familiar, and smiled in sphinx-like fashion, but gave Ikey an encouraging pat on the back.

"You git that young feller up in the swamp to write her some po'try," he said to his dejected friend and satellite. "You can't keep up with her in the matter of colour on Sundays, an' you're ruinin' yourself in hair-oil since I took to goin' 'ithout it; but if you was to have somethin' slung off about the way she cleared out Millette's bar, an' marched Pete Simkins into gaol by the slack of his britches, you'd find it soften her wonderfully. Nothin' touches women like po'try; it sorter addles an' mixes of 'em up. When a woman's dead gone on a man of your style, Ikey, she's allers partickler nasty

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to him in public. Give that long-haired chap a dollar, an' he'll turn you out some-thin' as'll fetch her like a lamb."

"But I don't want to git ahead of you," Ikey somewhat fretfully exclaimed, though never swerving in loyalty to Old Man. "You ain't doin' nothin'; I'm gittin' the bulge on you."

Old Man smiled a fatherly smile as he refilled his pipe. He had gone through great amatory experiences in his younger days, and knew that a certain aloofness was not without its charm for a palpitating fair one like Miss Wilks.

"My son," he said, ramming home the tobacco with a discoloured forefinger, "if you kin git ahead of me, it's all right. She's bound to have one of us. Which one I ain't agoin' to proticerpate. When the crisis comes along we'll both wish we'd never been born, for sure. It stands to reason arter the way I've dragged you up, so to speak, she's took a fancy to you; but it stands to reason, too, if she's took a fancy to a man like you on that account, she can't bear to lose a man like me who's made you what you are. I'd have her up

afore the Judge, an' git her chopped in two with her own chopper, an' toss for halves, only your half 'ud allers be runnin' round arter my half, an' we'd git 'em mixed. Solomon knew a good deal about babies, no doubt, but not much about wimmen. I've lost all grip on him since I found out the way promiskus females hunted him up, an' got him to give parties for their benefit. You don't find Miss Wilks huntin' us up; she knows we draws the line at that. No; you git some verses and mention all the discouragin' things I've said about her. That'll let you have a bit of a start. When I've time to give my mind to her I'll tell you, an' we'll begin fair."

The simple-hearted Ikey was greatly relieved by the enunciation of these sentiments from the lips of Old Man. They had been friends from youth. Should a mere Wilks disturb that ancient friendship, love-inspiring female though she might be? No, a thousand times no; and yet Miss Wilks was such a gorgeous being, so handy to have round in case of emergencies that Ikey felt he could never give her up. Davenport's sudden coming to Four Corners

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had unsettled Ikey. The young Englishman was so very much in love with Sadie Vankleek that his amatory tendencies were vaguely felt by those around him. After much cogitation and an unwonted consumption of tobacco, Ikey determined to take Old Man's advice, and, saddling his mule one evening, set off for Skeeter Joe's dwelling in the swamp, passing Colonel Burr as he did so.

The Colonel nodded affably to Ikey, offered him a cigar—he seemed to keep the whole of the adult population of the village in cigars, although rather disgusted to find that most of them chewed his gifts instead of smoking them—and strolled on through the soft evening light towards the shore. There was none of that gradual fading into darkness which characterizes an English dusk. "At one stride came the dark," as the night-birds sallied forth from the Bush, and the bull-frogs in the Creek began their nightly serenade to harsh-voiced fair ones, their dull booming notes mellowed and softened by the distance until they resembled the placid lowing of home-returning herds.

Colonel Burr leisurely entered Mrs. Vankleek's garden, bowed affably to Davenport and Sadie on the verandah—they were far too much engrossed with each other to be more than dimly conscious of his presence—and strolled onward towards the lower part of the garden. Through the quickly gathering gloom he caught a momentary glimpse of the scarlet flower within a woman's hair. The soft rustle of a silken skirt guided him towards her as, without appearing to see him, she turned down the path which led towards the shore and disappeared.

The Colonel put his hand to his heart—every swish of Mrs. Vankleek's rapidly receding skirts drew him to her—threw away his cigar, carefully flicked his immaculate boots—alike the envy of all the village beaux and the despair of his negro servant—with a handkerchief, smiled curiously, and followed.

Mrs. Vankleek drew him onward beneath the trees as if she, too, were conscious of her power to make him follow after through this odorous maze of overhanging boughs, this soft carpet of lush grasses

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which muffled up the sound of every foot-
step, and rendered both pursuer and pursued
mere shadows gliding through a phantom
world. Only the fragrant odours of the
flowers, the resinous scent from lonely pines,
spared by the woodman's axe as grim
sentinels to check the onward march of
devastating civilization, the soft murmu
of the river below—only these were real;
only these spake of life and love, the
yearning of soul to soul, the desire of the
moth for the star, of the star for the moth,
the unsatisfied longing for happiness, of the
Power beyond the moth and star, the light
and the gloom, the joy and the sorrow.

The woman dropped her uplifted palms
with a short, sharp cry; the man flung
his hat to the ground to follow her bare-
headed through the dewy darkness of the
night. They were both creatures of fate,
fleeing and pursuing in obedience to some
unknown decree which ruled their tortured
lives; and so, unseen of each other, yet
drawn onward, they came beyond the
garden's sheltering gloom into the light
of the slowly rising stars at the river's
edge—that river which stayed them both,

and wandered on, bearing upon its tranquil bosom the woes and sorrows of human lives—their burdens and crimes—to lose and purify itself within immeasurable depths of the salt sea.

Mrs. Vankleek stood idly looking into the water, the soft breath of the breeze playing upon her flushed cheeks, whilst, black and grim, the mountains on the other side rose up in overwhelming bulk as if to crush her with the implacable, unhasting, inexorable march of Time. For forty years she had watched them—the river between—as happy child, as wife and mother, as widowed wife, as broken-hearted woman weeping away the weary days and nights. The passing years, witnesses of the tragedy and comedy of her life, were scarcely seconds to that giant mass which crushed and overawed her into insignificance. The helplessness, the powerlessness of man and woman to shape their lives, the insignificance of human existence, smote her as with a sword. Darkness and the shadow of Death and Time, were over all; there was nothing to sweeten, nothing to lessen, the pangs of past remembered joys; only the waters of oblivion to

overwhelm her, a little folding of tired hands to sleep, and rest!

But Mrs. Vankleek's strong nature cried aloud to Heaven in rebellion against this hopeless creed. Her life was empty and barren of love; her husband had deserted her without leaving a trace behind. Why recall those days? why make them a perpetual sorrow and reproach? why shut her eyes to the future? why weep salt tears, and toss upon her troubled bed in anguished mourning for one who had forgotten her? Had she not suffered for her pride? expiated her obstinacy? humbled herself to the God who had punished her? mourned the memory of the man she loved? Why should this dead man—he must be dead; no one would be so monstrously wicked as to conceal from the wife he had once loved his whereabouts, for more than twenty years—rise up before her to poison at its source another love which might yet be hers? Surely the world would absolve her from all blame if she married this stranger, whose eyes looked things she had never thought to see again, whose voice was a caress, whose presence a——

"Oh-h!" She gave a little cry; for Colonel Burr's shadow mingled on the sand with hers. "You here, Colonel Burr?"

"Yes; I expected to find you, Mrs. Vankleek."

"Why?"

"How can one tell why? I caught a gleam of the flower in your hair and—followed."

"It might have been some one else."

"But it wasn't."

"No; it wasn't, Colonel Burr. I was restless, and came out, because——"

"Because, though Nature crushes and overwhelms, she is the mother who takes us to her breast, soothes our pain, enables men and women to endure."

Mrs. Vankleek looked at him curiously. "Pain!—Pain! Life is nothing but pain! Don't talk to me about Nature being kind to us. When we make a mistake, Nature mocks at us, stays serenely aloof, or crushes us until we die and are buried out of sight. Comfort us? No. Nature is the physician who gives us an opiate that we may gather strength to endure more pain! This great God who fashioned us, who knows our

weaknesses, watches our marred lives and makes no sign."

His eyes held hers. "Look for a sign, and you shall find it. Eyes blinded by tears fail to see it. Ah, the days that are lost lamenting o'er lost days! The joy of life is always before us."

She smiled mockingly. "The *joy* of life!"

"Yes; the joy—the joy which comes to the few—the joy of love. Commonplace people content themselves with commonplace, effortless lives. The man and woman whose love is eternal must hunger and fast and follow false fires until they understand themselves, until they soar to the heights of that love. 'Tis but your puling boy and girl who love for a day, then quarrel and drift apart. All love, to reach its highest range, must be sanctified by sorrow, and purified in the cleansing fires of experience, so that at last it shall come to crown a man's and a woman's life and give them a foretaste of heaven. It doesn't need possession, it doesn't need constant association; it doesn't need mutual concessions, half-measures. Its white flame

burns invisible to public gaze. But the man and woman who have wept for it, watched for it, waited for it, hungered for it, toiled for it, who are willing to die for it, know that the supreme moment shall come once in their lives when soul speaks to soul, the lies and shams of the world sink down before it, the——”

She was in his outstretched arms, lip to lip, strained to his breast, murmuring half-incoherent sounds, sobs, sighs, reproaches that he should dare to speak to her thus. Then she drew herself violently away.

“Don’t you see?” she cried. “Can’t you see? All you have said condemns me for false wife, false woman. He is beside you. His voice yours, his eyes yours, his touch yours; the bitterness of the past comes back to me. You only took away the pain for a moment. I can’t forget him. I can’t forget. This is his revenge. After all these years, my husband thrusts himself again into my heart. I love him, I love him! The poor dead shade, this pale phantom of bygone years—boy, youth, husband—I can’t forget him. I can’t belong to any one else. Never speak to

me again. I'll not see you, not hear you. Oh, my heart is broken! My heart is broken!"

He stood alone, a smile pregnant with sympathy upon his lips. "Nature cold! Nature cruel! The world one scene of hopeless misery and woe!" He looked at the mountain-tops, and—laughed; at the river, and—wept. "I'm unworthy to touch her hand," he thought; "but I've come back, and—she needs me. She needs me. She's never forgotten our childish love, the days of our brief happiness; she cannot forget. My God, how she has suffered! If she hadn't needed me, I'd have gone away again without a word. She doesn't even suspect who it is—that she is again in love with her own husband. Now for Ducaine. The reckoning must be a heavy one for all these wasted years.

CHAPTER X.

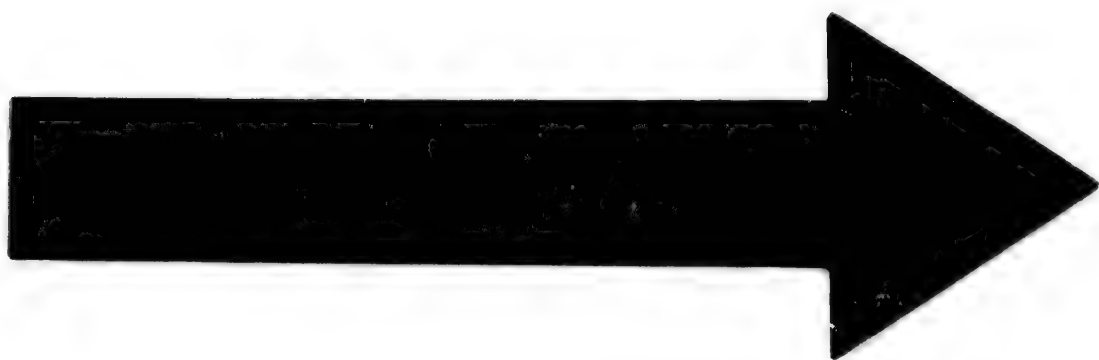
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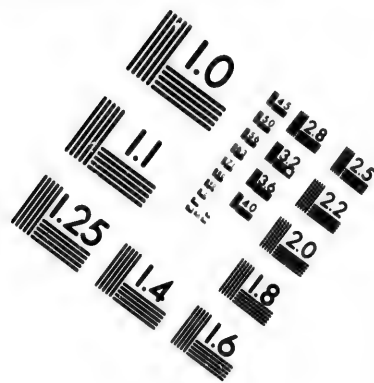
DAVENPORT and Sadie, left alone on the verandah, watched Burr's retreating figure with curious eyes. They had noticed the change in Mrs. Vankleek with some slight feeling of jealousy on Sadie's part, with cordial sympathy on Davenport's.

Davenport had conceived a great affection for this handsome, melancholy woman who treated him as a son, and offered him the *entrée* to her family circle in the intervals when he was not ministering to the wants of his stock or making hay. There were few traces of the "tenderfoot" left in the handsome, energetic young Englishman. He was bronzed and bearded, as strong as a horse, and had grown into his environment without losing any native qualities. There was so much for him to do in fighting the

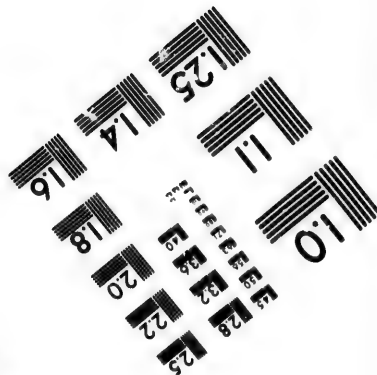
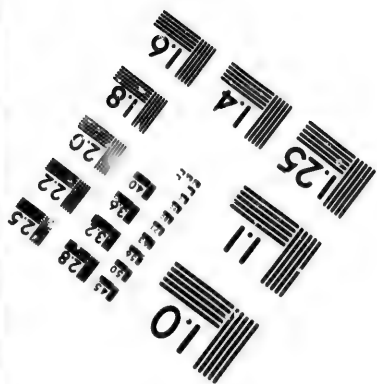
forest primeval, that he had no time for regrets at his expatriation. His father had sent him another hundred pounds, and a long letter of congratulation at having fallen on his feet. "Marry a nice, steady, sensible girl," the letter concluded. "I never knew a farmer succeed alone. If you don't do well now, I shall be extremely disappointed should you consider it necessary to turn up in England again without any visible means of support. Your younger brother is just beginning to want to spread his wings also; the next hundred pounds must go to him. P.S.—Your mother sends her blessing, with a request that you will read your Bible, and be careful to change your socks whenever you get wet feet. She was about to add a recommendation to wear flannel next to your skin; but I told her that it would be unnecessary, as it is a custom of the country. Do not contradict this, or it will make her very unhappy."

Davenport had returned the hundred pounds, with cordial thanks. The sum would have been extremely convenient in the event of certain contingencies, but he knew that his father could ill spare the





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money. As luck would have it, for twenty pounds he had been enabled to purchase some handsome furniture, old-fashioned, and fit to last for another hundred years. How it had reached Four Corners, or when, no one knew; but, the owner having died, people unanimously refused to have anything to do with it on the ground of its being unlucky. They preferred light rock-chairs and tables of modern make. In consequence of this preference, Davenport obtained the whole of it for a hundred dollars, and was now, as he sat by the open door, tentatively striving to break to Sadie the reason for this purchase. Janie Ducaine, seeing from the expression of his eyes that he was in deep waters, withdrew to the verandah, and, opening a book, began to read.

Sadie, as usual, rallied Davenport upon his preoccupation.

"Is there anything wrong with the stock?" she inquired, with an air of profound seriousness. "Mr. Davenport, nothing causes you serious anxiety unless a cow is sick. Have you lost one of those uninteresting animals?"

Davenport laughed. "No, thanks; you

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know very well that I love cows and calves and all the other animals that walk the earth—except skunks. Of course I get anxious about the cattle sometimes.”

“But you prefer cows to everything else. They alone hold undisputed sway in your heart.”

“Yes; mostly cows. They give milk and beef.” He had already overcome his English prejudices against eating cow beef. In a land where cows abound, sex does not count.

Sadie laughed provokingly. She was piqued by his absorbing interest in the animal world, and would fain have transferred a reasonable proportion of it to herself. “You give up to cows what was meant for—for——”

“Womankind,” he flashed back.

Sadie tapped her foot on the ground as she swung backwards and forwards in a rocker. Davenport, watching the little slipper, half off her foot, would have given worlds to kiss it.

“I gathered, Mr. Davenport, that your interest in cows was not confined to individual specimens of the race,” she continued.

"Ye—es. I like them all."

"Do you treat what you so elegantly call 'womenkind' in the same way?"

His face brightened. "No; that's different."

"I don't understand, Mr. Davenport. You are as enigmatical as Old Man or the Sphinx."

"Well, you know, in the world there are many cows for a man; there should be only one woman."

Sadie affected to be provoked. "I believe you purposely led up to this. Who is this one woman who has secured your young affections, Mr. Davenport?" She paused a moment to still further embarrass him. "Perhaps you are preparing to offer her the cows as well as—as well as your heart."

This chance remark additionally harassed Davenport. Had she heard anything about the furniture, and taken it for granted that he was reckoning upon her consent to marry him?

"You see," he began, confusedly—"You see, it was so awfully cheap; I got it for twenty pounds."

Sadie began to laugh again. "Oh, I cannot think in gaps. What *are* you talking about?"

"I—well—that is—you see——"

She shot a mischievous glance at him, taking the lovesick swain in with lightning-like rapidity.

"Ah, you are still laughing at me," he protested.

"I frankly admit it. You have given twenty pounds—a preposterous price—for a cow, or something of the sort; but I really can't tell why you should be so bewildered over the matter. Was it a bad cow? Did it decline to approve of you until some equitable arrangement had been made about milk?"

"It wasn't a cow."

Sadie's foot tapped impatiently. "Hadn't we better begin again, if—if there is any beginning or ending to this cow? There is to most cows—the ordinary commonplace animals, of course; but this one seems interminable."

"It wasn't a cow at all. It was an old table, and couch, and chairs, and—and—other things," he concluded lamely,

remembering that it would be unseemly to discuss his purchase of an old family four-poster with a young lady to whom he had not even proposed.

"Are—are these articles intended to adorn the barn for the cow? Cows don't usually require tables."

"No, no. You don't give one a chance. It was some furniture I bought. I—I wanted to fix up the house a bit, in case I——"

Sadie left off rocking. "Oh, I see, Mr. Davenport. You go a-wooing in the English fashion—with a sideboard under one arm, and a table under the other. How deliciously quaint."

"Ye-es; it is funny when you come to think of it, only I didn't intend doing anything of the sort."

"Then aren't you throwing away twenty pounds?"

Davenport saw his opening. "That's what I want to find out. I'm in a strange country. I don't know the fashions of its wooing; but I come——"

"Furniture included?"

"I come—I say, I come——"

"Well, you've said that before."

"I come—— Oh, Sadie, you know why I've come."

"With the furniture," she prompted.

"Don't forget the furniture. Is it outside?"

Davenport invoked a muttered blessing on the furniture. "Please let me get it out, Sadie. I'm awfully serious. It's more to me than anything I ever dreamed of. I've come to tell you that you're the dearest, sweetest, most beautiful girl in the whole world, and to ask you to be my wife."

Neither of them heard a rustle between the vines of the morning-glories, which shut off the verandah from the garden, or saw a pair of blazing eyes peering through the leafy scene. The short, shining barrel of a revolver was raised, and deliberately pointed in the direction of Davenport, who, all unconscious of it, had taken Sadie's hand.

"You will let me call you that?" he pleaded. "You will be my wife?"

"The most beautiful girl in the whole world!" she murmured abstractedly.

"The most beautiful girl in the whole world," he repeated firmly, striving to possess himself of her hand. "There can

be no question about it. If any man is fool enough to dispute it, I will knock him down and make him apologize."

"And you think that would be conclusive?" she asked shyly.

"It would be quite conclusive, my dearest sweetheart. I would keep on knocking him down until the question did not admit of argument."

By this time her small hand had disappeared in his huge brown fist.

"Am I really your—your sweetheart?" she whispered, her dewy eyes upraised to his. She had quite forgotten about the cows.

Janie Ducaine slipped out of the verandah from the other end; her white hand stole quietly through the leaves, grasped Skeeter Joe's thin fingers, and pulled him back, just in time to prevent the angry poet from seeing Davenport take Sadie in his arms. The dazed and unresisting youth suffered himself to be led away through the sombre pines fringing the garden, into a little clearing beyond; the girl's firm grasp upon his wrist never relaxing for an instant. Skeeter Joe stumbled along without making any sign,

save an occasional heave of thin shoulders, the sharp bones of which stuck up through his flannel shirt. Presently his hold on the pistol relaxed, and Janie Ducaïne took it away, with never a word of reproach until they came to a little opening in the Bush, upon which the first pale stars shone faintly down.

The lad—he was little more than a lad—flung himself on a fallen log, his face hidden in his hands, the strain of his heaving shoulders showing all that he was going through.

Janie's hand stole caressingly to his shoulder as if trying to stay the tempest in his soul.

"Murder, murder!" he gasped. "Another second, and I'd have shot 'em both."

"It wasn't like you," said Janie's quiet voice. "We all know your gentle ways with every living thing. You didn't mean to do it. Look up." She drew the lad's hands gently away from his face. "You couldn't have come out into the starlight with the guilt of murder on your soul. You wouldn't have killed a girl you cared for because she loved some one else better."

The poet looked away. He was morally guilty of murder, and he knew it.

"Think!" pursued Janie's gentle voice. "Think! They were so happy. He was telling her that he loved her; that she was the one God-appointed woman in the world for him. I could see the happiness in her eyes, the unshed tears she strove to keep from falling. We had no right to see it at all; it was sacred to them both—the supreme moment in their lives. And the devil sends you, with murder in your heart, to profane all this; perhaps to kill them both. You, who have so little time left to make your peace with God."

The poet wiped away thin red stains from his lips, and broke into a hacking cough. He knew, better than she did, how short the time was.

"I loved her first," he said fiercely. "You've never loved any one and seen them care for others. You don't know how it makes a devil of a man, his life a burning hell."

Janie gave a little shiver. The one she loved was beside her, and would never know of her love. Through all the hours of

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happy childhood they had been together ;
through all the days of youth and maiden-
hood ; until Fate, in the shape of Sadie,
drew them apart. Now a time was coming
when they would meet no more this side of
the grave ; a time when he must go down
into it, and leave the woman he loved,
the sunshine, the birds, the flowers, the
thousand and one delights of living. Of
late, Janie had been forgotten. Now that
the hand of Death was on him, the old
days came back. The desire for blood, the
thirst to kill Sadie and her lover, departed.
He was only a weak, miserable stripling,
about to sink into a nameless grave.

“ Reckon I’d better get back to the
hut,” he said. “ I ain’t safe here. I’d
crept up quietly, just to peer through the
leaves for a sight of her. I’ve come most
nights, to look at her window, to see her
shadow on the blind, to fill my hungry
heart ; and while I looked, I’d hear a
thousand voices telling me to come away
into the black depths of the Bush to die.
But something dragged me back again.
The sight of her gave me fresh strength.
Every day I didn’t see her, was two days

nearer the grave. I reckon I won't come any more," he added weakly. "I'm main tired of it all—main tired. There's nothing left now. Nothing—nothing! No—thing! I—I——"

He fell forward, swooning on the grass. When he revived, his head was on Janie's fair young breast, her arms around him. For one delirious moment he imagined that it was Sadie, and uttered a little exclamation of awed delight. Then he roused himself, the light gone from his handsome, pain-sharpened features, and shivered.

Janie drew back, conscious that the supreme moment in her life had come and gone. Something in the girl's wistful face seemed to strike the poet for a moment. He made an effort to forget his own woe.

"It's best we should say good-bye here," he muttered. "We've always been rare chums, Janie—rare good friends. I'm sorry you've seen all this. When it's over and done"—he shivered again—"maybe you'll think I'd gone off my head a little, and make allowances. I can't bear to die in a crowd, so I'm going back to the hut. My

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mule's in the bushes there. The old cuss knows I'm not as spry as I used to be."

"Won't you come back to the house with me?" pleaded Janie. "Papa would be only too glad to have you looked after properly. You will soon get well again if——"

Skeeter Joe smiled kindly. "Such pretty lips as yours don't take nat'rally to lyin', Janie. I'm dying, and you know it. We've all got to do it some time. There's no dodging that. But I'm glad it's me, and not you. Don't come any further. I'd have gone down pretty deep to-night if it hadn't been for you."

"You'll let me know how you are to-morrow?" pleaded Janie. "You can't be left to yourself like this."

The poet smiled. "If you knew anything about beasts and birds, you'd know they like to get away into the Bush to die by themselves. I've made a muddle of it all. I want to go out quietly. Where's the mule?"

They found that lop-eared, slab-sided, three-cornered hybrid placidly cropping the grass in another little clearing. As she ambled towards them her velvet muzzle

sought the poet's hand, her wicked eye regarding him with magnanimous forgiveness for many a contumelious epithet hurled at her in the agonies of composition. She allowed Janie to help her master into the saddle. Once there, the poet hesitated, as if reluctant to say farewell. Janie read the desire in his eyes, and put up her sweet lips to be kissed.

"It'll take the stain out of mine," the poet murmured. He bent over with an effort, and their lips met.

The mule looked round impatiently, twitched her tail, and prepared to start.

"Don't come near me again," whispered the poet. "You're too good, Janie. It'll only remind me of to-night."

He threw his remaining pistol to the ground, gave the mule a feeble kick in her flank ribs, from mere force of habit, and rode slowly off, turning for a moment to wave farewell to Janie, who stood looking after him with the meek despair of a saint. He did not know that she loved him, and would never know it.

When he had disappeared beneath the sombre branches of the pines, his cough

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echoing mournfully back, Janie picked up
 the pistol, wept over it, thrust the gleaming
 little weapon against her warm breast, and
 held it tightly there. Nothing could save
 him; but he should not die alone. She
 would disguise herself, and follow him until
 he went his journey of all days, and passed
 through the door of darkness into the Great
 Beyond. Soon would the dear sun flood the
 land and shine upon the saddest grave that
 ever tears kept green; soon would the light
 and joy go out of her life, and sorrow con-
 sume her soul. She gave a little quiver-
 ing sigh and turned homeward; with a
 desperate resolve to brave the world and
 minister to her poet's last moments. Then
 she would have time to think of her own
 sorrow and pity herself; but not till then.

And so, the poet rode on through the
 Bush, turning his back alike on the woman
 who loved him, and the woman who did
 not. The mule walked slowly, steadily, as
 if a constraining hand were on the bridle.
 It seemed to the shivering poet, ere the
 branches closed around them, that a tall,
 fleshless form walked by the mule's head, and
 that the name of that form was—Death!

CHAPTER XI.

THE LAST POEM.

"SKEETER JOE" lay dying in his bunk. There was no doubt whatever about that, to any ordinarily dispassionate observer. But the one observer, the sole critic of the moribund poet, was not dispassionate; and he (or she) refrained from obtruding the fact upon the notice of the sick youth. Outside, the wind roared through the Bush; the wailing waters of the angry Ottawa beat against the wooden piers, their rough music mournfully calling upon the poet to depart through the Valley of the Shadow. Amid the howling of the wind, the hoarse roar of the flood, the crackle of the logs upon the hearth, came the soft silvery tones of the invalid, reciting a momentous composition which had occupied his attention for the last ten hours—that is, when he was

not otherwise engaged in spitting blood or coughing. The one oil-lamp on a wooden stool by his bunk gave out a smoky light, through which the youth's eyes shone with unearthly brilliancy. Janie, in a boy's dress, and disguised under the appellation of "Timber Jake," sat on the only other stool which the log hut boasted. Now and then she threw out indifferent suggestions as to the originality of the poet's natural history; suggestions which the latter received with petulant impatience. Though these contributions to the literature of her native land were invariably rejected, Janie continued to listen to the poem with unfeigned and appreciative cordiality. At intervals, when she was evidently expected to applaud, she did so with a tin spoon against a battered old kettle, at the same time drawing the coverlet over the wasted arm which held the sheets of manuscript.

"There!" said the poet, as he finished. "Stop your infernal row for a moment. What do you think of that, Jake?"

"Me not bein' a scholard," the counterfeit Jake replied, in the slow simple tones necessary to the part of an unlettered feller

of logs, far removed from the social advantages of a judge's daughter—"Me not bein' a scholard, you says to me, 'Jake, how does it pan out?' and I says to you, me not bein' a scholard, 'Bed rock every durned line of it! Bed rock!' There's things in it like the singin' of robins in spring; things in it like the little flashes of light when dragon-flies flit across the sunshine; things in it as Shakespeare couldn't have done, or—or," he somewhat lamely added, "the *Ottawa Times*, or any of those mud-coloured ink-slingers over the river."

Skeeter Joe's cheek flushed warmly at this whole hearted eulogy. At the sound of it, he turned momentarily away from the entrance to the Valley of Death, then shook his head, and fell back in the bunk with a sigh.

"Maybe, Jake," he said. "Maybe; but for all that, the editor at Four Corners won't print 'em unless they're paid for at advertisin' rates. He sent back the last lot, with his compliments, an' he wasn't takin' any stock in poetry just then."

An ominous frown gathered upon Timber Jake's pretty brow.

"Oh, of course; he wouldn't know real poetry when he had it under his nose. You said jest now you got a chill when the answer came back."

"A death chill, Jake. Wanderin' about tryin' to forget a girl begun it, and that Four Corners fellow finished me up. Yes, I'm goin' under, Jake. You'd better clear out to your own folk afore the worst happens. You remind me somehow of a girl who used to go to school with me, only you're shorter."

Jake did not affect to despise the gravity of the situation, but listened to the roar of the rapidly rising river against its banks.

"You don't feel," he asked quietly—"You don't feel called upon to wrestle it out instead of passin' in your checks?" There was a tremor in his voice—a feminine tremor—which the other was quick to note.

"Not a durned wrestle," said the poet, falling back again, and letting his two sheets of manuscript rustle to the floor. "I'm played out, Jake—done for. Something'll bust in a day or two, and finish me off. I'd have liked to see this yer foolishness in

print before I went; but another night'll finish me, and I sha'n't get a chance of bein' even with that Four Corners chap. I'd die easier if I could dip his head in his own ink bar'l. A fellow-citizen too!"

Jake gazed thoughtfully into the fire with puzzled eyes.

"I was over to Hutchinson's at Hawklesville to-day," he resumed presently, "an' the doctor gave me some stuff for you. I'll fix you up with a dose; then you won't want anythin' till the mornin'. It's eleven o'clock now."

The poet looked at Jake curiously. "You ain't had a sleep for a week, I reckon, Jake?"

The sham Jake almost burst into tears. Janie's father believed her to be paying a visit to her foster-mother, and would in all probability never speak to her again if he learned the truth about her unmaidenly conduct. Two days after their last interview, when wandering sadly through the Bush in her recently donned disguise, thinking of the absent poet who never thought of her, and wondering, in a blind, helpless kind of way, why the wrong people

should always fall in love with each other, the girl had seen Skeeter Joe ride languidly past on his flop-eared old mule, his head hanging dejectedly down, his emaciated body swaying loosely from side to side in the saddle. She again resolved that he should not die alone. There was Death in his face, in the unnatural red of his hectic cheeks, the brilliant light of his feverish eyes. She followed Skeeter Joe to his broken-down shanty in the depths of the Bush, a few miles from Four Corners, and saw him lurch in the saddle. There was a thin streak of blood oozing from his lips. The doomed youth had broken another blood-vessel.

When he recovered his senses, Skeeter Joe found himself stretched on his rough bunk. For a moment, it seemed to him that he heard the rustle of departing feminine skirts. Pinned to the coverlet, however, he found a note, the rude calligraphy of which jarred upon his fastidious taste, informing him that the writer would return that evening with some "store grub, an' make you cumferable." This unlooked-for communication was signed "Timber

Jake ;" and that evening "Timber Jake"—alias Janie Ducaine—returned to the hut, bringing with him a couple of bulging saddle-bags, laden with good things.

Since then "Timber Jake" had quietly and unostentatiously taken charge of the friendless youth, feeding her hopeless passion with every breath drawn by him as she watched night and day, waiting for the end. When the poet was not devoting his last moments to sorrowful reflections about Sadie Vankleek, he sought solace in the composition of moving and original verses—verses which his one desire was to see printed before he died. He had not a friend or a dollar in the world, and affected to regard Timber Jake as an emissary of the devil, sent to buy his soul in exchange for delicacies, wherewith to pamper his feeble appetite.

"You ain't had a sleep for a week, Jake," he repeated presently.

"Not bein' used to your goin's on," said Jake,—"*nat'rally* I ain't had a wink. When you gets to r'arin' round an' breakin' blood-vessels, an' seein' angels playin' flutes in the distance, an' callin' for your old woman,

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when the only female, old or young, in this yer shanty is myself"—he laughed bitterly—"it's only nat'ral these yere unknown parties'll expect some one to look after 'em when they gits here."

As he spoke, he poured some medicine into an old cracked tea-cup, and held it to the sick youth's lips. One arm stole gently round the boy, who, with a gleam of mischief in his great eyes, put up a thin white hand to the cheeks above him, and gave them a caressing rub.

Jake was manifestly discomposed by this poetical exhibition of tenderness.

"Quit your foolin'," he said hurriedly, "an' drink this yer mixture. It'll keep you quiet till mornin'."

The boy drank with difficulty. "Yes, Jake, I reckon it'll keep me quiet till mornin'; that's about the time the river leaves off callin'. I've cried 'Wolf' pretty often, but this is the last time, I reckon."

Jake affected not to hear this pessimistic remark, but talked on in wandering fashion until Skeeter Joe's head fell back upon his arm. Then he covered him up carefully, veiled the light of the lamp with an old

towel, and drew a revolver from the shelf in a manner which betokened a strong reluctance to close contact with firearms.

The wind, as it blew beneath the rude door of the pine slabs, rustled the papers about the floor. Jake picked them up, bent over Skeeter Joe to make sure that the opiate had done its work, and crept cautiously into the darkness.

A low whinny of delight greeted him as he entered the narrow shanty which served for a stable. Without striking a light, he saddled his brown mare, led her into the trail, and mounted.

"Now, old lady," he said, in strangely feminine tones for such a swashing exterior, "you must gallop for all you're worth."

The mare whinnied again, and broke into a long, swinging gallop. As she sped through the darkness, Jake sat squarely back in the saddle, the reins hanging loosely, and only stirring when a splash of water from the mare's flying hoofs wetted his cheek. A mistake on the mare's part meant being dashed against the trunk of the nearest pine; but Jake made no sign,

only holding the papers a little tighter when the mare left the track.

After an hour's hard galloping, he detected a light in the distance.

"Shoooh!" he said to the mare. "Gently, lass, gently. We're nearly there. You are not going back to your own stable. Be good, and do as you're told. You shall have numberless oats and bread and salt when we go back again."

He drew rein on the outskirts of Four Corners, and tied the mare to a pine stump. Then he crept along to the one tumbledown hut in which there was a light, and peered through the window with a satisfied look.

Mr. Watson H. Bangs—Mr. Bangs comprised in his own person the editor, staff, "devil," printer, advertising agent, and proprietor of the *Four Corners Gazette*—was composing Saturday's leader; assisted in his consumption of the midnight oil by a bottle of whisky, which occupied one end of the table where he sat. Every now and again, he snipped long paragraphs from "exchanges" on a bench at his side, and laboriously pasted them together. Then he would march to the nearest "case," pick up

the type from various little boxes, and throw it about with all the rapidity of a practised juggler.

Suddenly the door opened, and Jake entered, dripping from the storm.

"Old Man Bangs" made for the drawer of a distant table in which his revolver lay hid. When he saw that his visitor was little more than a boy, he abandoned all warlike intentions, casting at the same time a reluctant glance at the whisky bottle, as if uncertain how long it would hold out against the new-comer's attacks.

Jake slid into the editorial chair, after carefully closing the door, and Old Man Bangs, with a reluctant nod in the direction of the bottle, went on with his task.

"Sit down," said Jake, briefly, pointing to a chair, and declining the implied invitation.

Old Man Bangs sat down, and refreshed himself with a pull at the bottle.

"It's a nice sort of night," he said cheerfully. "I guess, if the river keeps on risin', old Doc Hutchinson 'll be drowned out afore mornin'."

"P'r'aps," said Jake.

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"There's a sort of yarn when the river's that high," said Old Man Bangs, lighting a pipe—"There's a sort of yarn when the river rises suddenly, that it carries away a soul with the mornin' light. But I reckon you don't take no stock in such dum foolishness?"

"Reckon I do," said Jake, still speaking without a sign of resentment. "That's why I've come down."

"Jusso," said Old Man Bangs, puffing away with undiminished composure. "Jusso. What's up, young man?"

Jake carefully laid his revolver on the table. Old Man Bangs realized that his visitor meant business, and had him at a disadvantage.

"Some folks outside of Four Corners allow this yer paper of yours ain't high-toned," said Jake, carelessly. "You don't put on frills enough."

Old Man Bangs looked longingly at the table-drawer.

"Guess I could put more tone into the conversation, if I'd my usual seat," he said significantly, and went on smoking.

"P'r'aps," said Jake; "p'r'aps." He laid the papers he had brought with him

on the table. "Some of the folks want a little native talent in this paper of yours. They allowed, mebbe, you should take more stock in poetry, an' native produce, such as straddle-bugs, an' chipmunks, an' things."

"All the fools in the world ain't dead yet," said Old Man Bangs, savagely.

"P'r'aps," said Jake again. "I said they was wrong. 'You don't give Old Man Bangs a chance,' I said to 'em. 'He's well-meanin', is Old Man Bangs; but you don't give him a chance. Now, if I was to drop in on him, and ask him to give native talent a show, why Old Man Bangs would be agreeable.' So they allowed I'd better try."

Old Man Bangs, with studied composure, stretched out his hand and took up the paper on the table. He recognized a note in his own spidery writing which Jake had pinned on the top.

"I told 'em," said Jake, speaking with slow and studied insistence, "I told 'em I'd only to take you some native produce and you'd print it straight off."

Old Man Bangs rose without a word, walked to the composing case, and rapidly

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began to "set up" the verses which Jake had brought, his fingers flying with all the precision of machinery. After half-an-hour's hard work, he screwed up the type in a "forme," took a "pull," and brought it to Jake, who read through the words, still keeping one hand on his revolver and criticizing the spelling with a sublime disregard for masculine methods.

"Will that do?" growled Old Man Bangs, sullenly resenting his enforced labour.

Jake gazed admiringly at the poem so rapidly called into being.

"Pretty, ain't it? I'll tell the folks you're no slouch when you do get a chance," he added admiringly.

He tucked the printed paper carefully away into his vest pocket, and sprang for the door. Old Man Bangs rushed for his revolver in the drawer of the distant table, and, with a dexterity acquired by long practice, took a flying shot at Jake as he disappeared, then blew out the light and waited for reprisals, but none came.

The brown mare scented her master, as he crawled slowly through the darkness and

hauled himself with difficulty into the saddle.

"Gently, Winny, gently," he said. "That wretch has shot me in the arm. I didn't think a little bullet could hurt so much."

The girl heroically adhered to her assumed part, although every now and again she could not restrain a sob as the mare walked away. Presently something warm ran down the mare's flank, and made her start. For three hours she paced slowly along the narrow path, halting every now and then when her rider clung to the saddle and groaned, faint from loss of blood. The wind fell as suddenly as it had risen. Through the straight trunks of the pines, the swollen river glimmered here and there with faint streaks of light. A rift in the sullen sky betokened the coming dawn. With careful steps, the mare plodded forward, halting now and again to look round at her rider, who motioned her on with a feeble wave of his hand.

When they reached the clearing, "Jake" slid out of the saddle and crawled into the hut, leaving his mare standing at the door.

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Seizing a whisky bottle, he drank long and eagerly; then propped himself up on his stool by the boy's bunk, and tightened his sash.

Presently a ray of sunlight stole into the hut, and the shadows fled away before the cheerful singing of the birds.

The boy awoke with a glad little cry. "Jake, where are you? Jake, I've had such a dream. I saw Sadie, and——"

Something white glistened on the rude blanket.

"Ja—! Why, snakes alive, Jake, how did this come here?"

He fell to reading the verses with delirious enjoyment, and a soft, pink flush came into his cheek.

"Why, Jake, they're printed! Smell the lovely ink! 'Song to my Lady of Dreams,' by our gifted fellow-townsmen!"

A fit of coughing interrupted him. Jake, leaning back so that the boy could not see his face, lied with tranquil indifference.

"Oh, Old Man Bargs came up here after you'd dropped off to sleep."

"Yes, Jake, yes?"

"He'd misjudged you, so he printed the

verses, brought them over, and planked down a ten-dollar bill. Here's the money."

The boy gave another cry. "Jake, Jake, that's fame! That's more than love! That's fame. Hang the money! No, let me see it. Where is it?"

Jake handed him the money with difficulty. The boy pressed it to his feverish lips.

"Jake, Jake, there's blood on it! Wha— Oh, my God, I'm choking—chok——!"

* * * * *

Jake tried to raise his head, but in vain. A little later the mare thrust open the door with her velvet muzzle and walked into the hut. The dead boy reclined on the arm of his friend, and Janie, her long hair freed from the cap which had hidden it, lay senseless on his breast.

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CHAPTER XII.

THE END OF "SKEETER JOE."

AFTER the ring episode, Ducaine began to reflect seriously upon the danger of his present position. Scarcely had he recovered from the shock of knowing that he must defend his life from the assaults of a relentless foe, when the woman to whose care he had confided his own helpless little daughter some twenty-one years ago, sent for him in order to make a death-bed confession. Actuated by a desire to befriend Mrs. Vankleek, and thinking that her child was too delicate to live, the tender-hearted Irish-woman had exchanged the infants in the belief that she was providing Mrs. Vankleek with a companion for her loneliness. With characteristic impetuosity she did not stop to consider that this companion was the child of the man who had wronged Mrs.

Vankleek in the vilest possible manner. She had been bribed heavily by the Judge when he confided to her that the infant child he brought was Mrs. Vankleek's. This admission had become necessary owing to the woman's refusal to take the child until she knew whose it was. She was the only person, however, who knew all the true history of Ducaine's wild midnight ride with Vankleek's new-born child in his arms. At first, her conscience had taken the alarm; but, on Ducaine's promising to return the child should the mother fret over its loss, she consented to take charge of it. Then came the news that Mrs. Vankleek was on the point of death from grief at loss of her husband and child. Both the children had blue eyes; hence the easiness of the deception. If Mrs. Vankleek's child thrived with the Judge, there would be many chances in the future of making a little money out of the secret; if the child died, Mrs. Vankleek would be spared the shock of knowing the truth. As it happened, neither Sadie nor Janie had died; they were both remarkably healthy girls, who, in the ordinary course of events,

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might reasonably hope for a long life. The bewildered Irishwoman, under the pressure of conscience, dictated her confession to her doctor, and then seemed to consider the matter ended.

Janie received the news very quietly. There had never been much sympathy between Ducaine and herself. She was grateful to him for all his kindness to her; but they were so radically different in temperament and tastes, that the news made little impression upon either of them. When Ducaine had finished his announcement and sat waiting to hear what she would say to it, she kissed him on the forehead, and asked for time to think the matter over.

"I suppose it will be an exchange," she said somewhat wearily. "Sadie will come here, and I had better go to my mother."

Her eyes brightened for a moment at the thought of Mrs. Vankleek. It would be sweet to feel a mother's arms around her, to weep her heart out on that generous breast. But everything seemed dull and indistinct; there was a leaden weight oppressing her; the dead boy's face as he

lay in his bunk, a handful of wild flowers strewn upon his quiet breast, was ever before Janie. The memory of that last kiss—that kiss which had set a seal of blood upon her lips—clung to her. What should she do? how contrive a decent sepulchre for the poor boy in obedience to his last request to bury him in the Bush afar from the ribald crowd who had jeered at his aimless life? In her despair she remembered Old Man Evans, and how, many a time and oft, he had befriended the dead boy. She was safe with him; he would guard her secret and protect her honour. Many women had reason to be grateful to Old Man; they trusted him because he never betrayed a trust.

She was roused from her sad reverie by Ducaine's voice.

"I'm going down to Mrs. Vankleek's," he said quietly, "just to explain the matter. Perhaps she will marry me now. She would rather do that than part with Sadi." This was better than putting on the screw financially. A woman may sometimes be reached through her purse; through her heart always.

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Thus it was that Janie accompanied the Judge to Four Corners, and left him as he turned down the wharf in the direction of Mrs. Vankleek's house, just before they came to Old Man's hut. Old Man himself sat by the fire in company with Ikey, somewhat perplexedly thinking out the situation, and wondering whether all the resources of his generalship would carry him to a successful issue. Poetical justice demanded that Ducaine should be punished; but Ducaine's ideas of poetical justice were of the vaguest possible kind. He was far more likely to shoot the returned Vankleek on sight than to allow himself to be treated in the same way. Having become an unofficial Master of the Ceremonies, as it were, Old Man felt it incumbent upon him to see that there should be no hitch in the official programme. When all these questions of life and death had been settled, there remained the more joyous one of marriage—a question which might also involve the same issues unless very carefully handled. He stole a glance at Ikey, who sat, head in hands, disconsolately looking at the stovepipe as if he could see Miss Wilks's visage in its rusty surface.

Just as Old Man's features relaxed into a grin of pitying amusement at Ikey's woe-begone aspect, some one knocked timidly at the door; and Ikey sprang to his feet, involuntarily running his fingers through his hair with a frightened gesture.

"'Tain't oiled, neither," he muttered, hastily surveying himself in the one small fragment of looking-glass which the hut contained. "Wonder what she wants?"

Old Man's firm hand on his shoulder brought him up with a round turn.

"Don't you be a blitherin' idgeot," he said, not unkindly. "'Tain't Wilks; she gin'rally makes as much noise as a fair-sized airthquake. It's some one a good deal smaller an' lighter. I kin tell by her step."

The unnerved Ikey sat down again with a sheepish laugh.

"I might have known it warn't her," he said apologetically. "She's sorter gittin' on my nerves—chopper an' all. I'll see who it is."

He walked to the door and flung it open. Janie slowly entered, the tears rolling down her cheeks. She was overwrought, broken-hearted; all the joy of life had gone from

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her. In the bitterness of her sorrow she wanted to die; to be at rest; to escape from all thought of the dead boy in the lonely Bush; to drift away into a dreamless sleep. She came blindly into the hut, her hands outstretched as if groping for Old Man, who made a sign to Ikey to leave them alone.

Janie came towards Old Man without thought of the tears running down her pale cheeks. Many a time in childish sorrow had her feet borne her to him; now that the supreme woe of dawning womanhood had overtaken her, she turned to this grim old cynic for pity and for help, and fell on her knees beside him. Then the tempest burst, and vehement sobs choked her utterance.

Old Man sat perfectly still; one huge, scarred, brown hand gently stroking the girl's pretty hair.

"Thar! thar! Don't take on so! Don't take on so!" he murmured. "Old Man'll help you. What's the matter? Thar! thar! Now give me your handkercher. You'll feel better soon. Come, come! That's it, that's it. Let me dabble it in

the pitcher for you. That's better. Now on your forehead an' your wrists, an' just a touch behind the ears. I guess you've bin overdone lately. Now, now; I know all about it. I was a-waitin' for you to come to me to help you. 'Thar! thar! You did all you could; don't you fret an' worry yourself. Ikey an' me've bin at the hut the last two nights, to keep any one back as got wand'rin' round to spy out things. 'Thar! thar! You just keep quiet whiles I think out what's best to be done."

As he spoke, Old Man, with soft gentle touches, dabbled cool water from the pitcher over the forehead and wrists of the sorrow-stricken girl who, exhausted by the outburst of grief in which she had indulged, lay back upon his strong arm like a tired child. It was a new sensation to Old Man to find his enemy's daughter come to him in her sorrow; but he never made war on women or children. It was not in his strong nature to wound the gentle girl who, despite her father's frowns, had looked upon him as a friend. She had no one to respect her secret, except Ikey and himself. Miss Wilks, with the best intentions in the

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world, would be sure to do something foolish, and betray the cause of Janie's interest in Skeeter Joe. And so, with his customary magnanimity, Old Man soothed and comforted the poor girl, uttering tender words of wisdom which dulled her grief, and transformed his hard features until they became almost beautiful. His strength comforted Janie; the virtue of it went out of him into her heart, and enabled her to endure, to suffer and be strong, to bind up the raw edges of her gaping wound, and bear her trouble to the end. In broken, disconnected sentences, she explained to Old Man the dead youth's wish to be buried in the Bush near his hut, afar from the haunts of his unsympathetic fellows, amid the hushed silence of the lonely little clearing, with the sombre pines he loved so well to guard his rest.

Comforted and reassured, Janie stole away homeward, after promising to meet Old Man and Ikey at the hut that night. When she had gone, Old Man summoned Ikey to a hasty conference. There was not a coffin to be had in the village. Suddenly Old Man remembered that a criminal lay

under sentence of death in the goal, and that it was the custom of the gaoler always to keep the coffin of a condemned prisoner in readiness among the rafters of an outhouse behind the prison. Time was pressing; this coffin must be secured at all hazards.

That evening, Old Man strolled carelessly down to the gaol amid the ominous blackness of a gathering storm, and entered into a seemingly casual conversation with Gaoler Grey.

"'Thar bein' a kinder needcessity for a coffin in a hurry," he leisurely remarked to that good old man, "that poor shiftless crittur, Skeeter Joe, havin' pegged out, I thought I'd buy yours, seein' as how it ain't wanted for a month. He must be buried to-night, an' I can't lay my hands on another. Folks here are so shiftless; they never keep nothin' handy—not even a coffin. What might yours be worth? I ain't particklar about a few dollars."

"Government coffins cost ten dollars each," said Gaoler Grey hesitatingly. "'Bein' a month off the time for Black-mouthed Jake to swing, I could git another ready for him by then. I've been labourin'

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long to convert him; but, somehow, he's got to hear from his friends about that coffin waitin' up in the shed, an' its hardened him. If he knew it was gone, he'd be willin' to give in; maybe the dear Lord 'ud git him yet. If you ain't got ten dollars," he continued, "I've saved up that for Jake's wife, an' I'd lend it to you to pay for the coffin. You'd look after her, poor soul. She's expectin' a child, an'—an' takes things hard. Seems to think a lot of Jake, though he's allers hammered her about a good deal. She's like a squaw; them squaws beyond the Point don't think nothin' of the braves unless the bucks give 'em a hidin' now an' again."

Old Man laid ten dollars on the table. "It's occurred to me," he said slowly, "you bein' the champion devil-wrastler for miles round, an' that parson of ours puttin' on airs about givin' a send-off to a corpse as ain't buried in undeseccrated"—"Unconsecrated," gently suggested the gaoler—"ground, if you'll promise to keep your mouth shet arterwards, you'd better come along an' run the show. I kin make a speech gin'rally," continued Old Man, with

some show of embarrassment; "but this ain't in my line. It sorter lays over me, so to speak. I ain't had no trainin' for it, most of my Sundays bein' spent in the Bush with Ikey."

The gaoler's blue eyes gleamed with holy fire. "The dear Lord'll help me to rake you in some day," he said fervently. "The joy of it'll come into your heart an' make a little child of you agin, Old Man. It'll all be a beautiful new world to you, with the Lord's handwritin' on ev'ry bird an' beast an' flower."

Old Man dryly shook his head. "Not yet, gaoler, not yet. It's taken me all my time to know 'em up till now, an' I can't begin agin yet. Thar's trouble ahead," he added darkly. "I never was great on askin' favours; but if you could sorter arrange for things bein' straightened out a bit, to ease one poor child's breakin' heart, I'd take my own chances of what's goin' to happen to me in the next world. You'd better lock up an' come along now, or we won't be ready. Ikey's gone on to do the diggin'."

After the gaoler had handed the keys

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to a deputy, he brought out a couple of lanterns, and went round to his shed, where lay the rough shallow box of unpainted pitch pine, originally intended for Black-mouthed Jake. By the aid of a ladder, and to the sullen accompaniment of distant thunder, Old Man reached the coffin, lowered it down, and strapped it on the back of his mule, which immediately tried to rub off its unwelcome burden against the side of a tree. When Old Man had adjusted this slight difference of opinion between himself and the mule, he was ready to start, and looked round for the gaoler.

The gaoler knelt down on the ground, his white hair falling to his shoulders, and motioned Old Man to join him.

Old Man hesitated. "'Tain't in my line," he muttered. "But seein' as you're runnin' the purseedin's, I s'pose it's only fair an' square for me to chip in."

He knelt down somewhat awkwardly by the old gaoler, who put one arm around his neck and raised the other appealingly to heaven.

"Dear Lord," he prayed, "we, Thy

wand'rin' children, are settin' out to return to Thee one Thou hast called hence. We beseech Thee to bring us unto Thy fold when the time is ripe for us also to be gathered in. Bless an' watch over us to-night, an' guide our steps into the way of peace. Thou seest, dear Lord, this child of Thine a-hesitatin' an' perhapsin' an' puttin' off the day of repentance. Make him Thy accepted servant. Take him 'stead of me, O Lord. Though the pangs of hell get hold of me, yet will I rejoice in his salvation. Hear us, good Lord, an' accept the soul now offered Thee to-night. Amen."

Utterly taken aback by this unexpected turn of events, Old Man maintained a grave silence, feeling that, if Gaoler Grey couldn't make any impression on him, it was a rather hopeless task for any one else to attempt his conversion. Besides, he did not intend to be saved in lieu of any one else. That was not his idea of equity as between man and man. Presently the gaoler took his arm away from Old Man's neck.

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with grave simplicity. "I've reintroduced you to the fold. When the dear Lord's need of you, He'll tell you what to do. You may think yourself a tough case, but He knows. You just leave it to Him that 'dwelleth in the whirlwind and rideth on the storm, Whose love is everlastin' peace, Whose shelter safe an' warm.' Now, we'll go and bury that poor boy you was a-tellin me of, an' intercede for him also."

For once in his life, Old Man meekly obeyed the directions of another man. As he afterwards explained, he had had no previous experience in such matters, and didn't like to seem officious. He had a theory of his own about the next world, which was somewhat akin to that of his Indian friends; but now, as he accompanied the old gaoler through the solemn files of the pines—grim sentinels of the night, their slowly waving boughs giving password and countersign to the birds of the air—he felt that Gaoler Grey was "runnin' the show," and must be given a free hand. And so he followed slowly on after the old man, the coffin on the mule's back brushing

against the branches as the animal swayed from side to side or stumbled over a fallen trunk.

It was impossible to see where they were going until the moon suddenly filtered down upon them, lighting up the great eyes of the mule and shining on the steel rings of her bit. Just at the entrance to the clearing where Skeeter Joe had erected his slab shanty, a black form glided from out the bushes and, with a little shiver at the mule's burden, came slowly towards them. In an instant, Old Man's strong arm was round the trembling girl; he drew her to his side with mute sympathy as the gaoler took the mule by the head and led it towards the hut.

In the centre of the little clearing was a newly dug grave; on one side of it the upturned freshly-smelling earth. The moist walls of Skeeter Joe's last resting-place were screened with cedar branches, the bottom hidden with fragrant wild flowers by Ikey after he had finished digging. Presently he emerged from the hut and helped to unload the mule. Then the door closed, and Janie again began to tremble

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violently until Old Man's firm grasp calmed her sorrow.

"You just hold up for a little," he softly whispered. "When it's all over, I'll take you quietly back, an' no one'll know anything about it."

In a short time the two men came out of the hut and waited. Old Man, his arm still around Janie, drew her towards the door, opened it, and remained outside whilst she prayed by the coffin. When Janie came out after an interval of a few minutes, she was no longer weeping, but walked with a firm step towards the open grave and knelt there. As Old Man quietly put on the coffin lid, he saw something white on the dead boy's breast. It was the enthusiast's last poem, entwined with roses.

Without an effort, Ikey and Old Man carried the coffin into the open air; the gaoler, bareheaded, Bible in hand, walking before them and repeating fragments of holy writ. When the coffin had been lowered into the grave, he fell on his knees and prayed fervently that this lonely soul might not be overlooked in its solitary resting-place at the Last Day. The brief

ceremony over, Ikey and the Gaoler noiselessly went away, leaving Old Man to fill in the grave.

Janie shrank back in the cold moonlight when the first shovelful of earth fell on the coffin, and turned her white face to Old Man as if imploring him to be gentle. And Old Man deftly, delicately, slipped the moist earth into the narrow opening, so that it should not lie too heavily on the dead boy's breast and crush the printed phantasies upon his heart. When he had finished his task, he put down the shovel just in time to hear a long-drawn quivering sigh, as Janie sank senseless at his feet. The wound in her arm had broken out, and was bleeding afresh in a red stream over the poet's grave.

Old Man, without wasting time, tied up the wound, took Janie in his strong arms as if she had been a little child, and carried her home through the dense Bush; her long hair shining whenever the moonlight penetrated the dusky shadows of the pines and fell upon the sad whiteness of her face.

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Four Corners doctor had just finished doing something to her arm. Instinctively she turned away from him to where Old Man sat, half hidden in the shadow of the curtain, put her hand in his, and, reassured by his firm touch, slept the sleep of a weary child.

CHAPTER XIII.

SADIE JOINS HER FATHER.

For the second time—his first visit had been unsuccessful—Ducaine walked rapidly down the wharf towards Mrs. Vankleek's house. In answer to his inquiry, he learned that both Mrs. Vankleek and Sadie were at home. The latter showed no disposition to leave the room when the Judge was announced in a ferocious and disgusted manner by Miss Wilks who, on his entering, immediately took up her position by the side of the door with an air which implied that she was ready for any emergency which required prompt and decisive muscular action. The undaunted Judge looked at her significantly. He was intimately acquainted with Miss Wilks's idiosyncrasies, and did not want her to be present, for she had a way of glaring at people of whom she disapproved in a decidedly unpleasant manner.

"The matters about which I wish to speak to you are strictly private," Ducaine said to Mrs. Vankleek. "May I ask you to be good enough to dismiss your servant? Perhaps Miss Vankleek will also excuse us for a little while."

"I am not aware," began Mrs. Vankleek haughtily, "that——"

"Precisely. That is the reason why I wish to communicate certain facts and the contents of certain documents to you," blandly urged Ducaine.

"Stay in the passage within call, Wilks," said Mrs. Vankleek. "Sadie, dear, leave us for a little while. I will send Wilks for you if I should want you again."

When Sadie and Wilks had left the room, the Judge hesitated for a moment, drinking in Mrs. Vankleek's beauty with an admiration which made him forget the revenge he had taken years ago. After the others had gone, Mrs. Vankleek's manner changed.

"So, sir," she said almost fiercely, "you have come to torment me again with your professions of affection? I consented to receive you to-day in order to make you clearly understand that this persecution

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must cease. Most men would have relinquished it long ago. I have no doubt that there are many women in the world who would feel flattered by your persistency. I am not one of them. Most men would have more pride than to force their attentions on a woman whom they had so deeply injured as you have me."

Ducaine bowed. "But I'm not as most men. You, of all women in the world, should know this. If ever man suffered the pangs of hell for a woman's sake, I am that man."

"Was it only to tell me this that you came here? What are your sufferings to mine—my days of tears, my lonely nights! Do you know why for so many years I have endured your persecution without protest? Do you know why I have so meekly submitted to your iniquitous thefts of my property? Do you know why I have received you, talked to you, even taken you by the hand? Do you know why"—she went on with gathering passion—"do you know why I have never denounced you as the stealer of my child, the wrecker of my happiness, when all I had to do was to

lift my little finger, and you would have been lynched by an infuriated mob?"

"Passion is always becoming to you, madam. It causes your eyes to flash in a manner which compels my most ardent, though unwilling, admiration. No; I am at a loss to understand this alleged forbearance on your part for the imaginary wrongs which you mention. Perhaps you will be good enough to enlighten me."

"Certainly. I loved my husband. If it had not been for my obstinate pride, our dissensions, so carefully fomented and encouraged by you, would have died a natural death. But when he left me—doubtless instigated by you—I resolved to bear my punishment, feeling that I deserved it. You were a part of it. That is why I have allowed you to enter my house; that is why I have encouraged you to hope that you might one day succeed in your plans—only in order to dash them to the ground, to make you suffer—if possible—as I have suffered. My punishment has been to weep through the best years of my life in unavailing repentance; yours is to find your plots foiled just when you imagine them on the

point of success. You threaten to foreclose the mortgage you have obtained on this property. You know very well that it is only an idle boast, that you cannot produce the deeds, that they were stolen from you on the night the coach was upset."

"By your friends and accomplices. Yes, I know that very well. They shall answer to me for it. I was a fool not to have foreseen such a possibility. Will you listen to me for a moment?"

"For the last time. After that do your worst. I give you this one opportunity for repentance and restitution."

He was startled and uneasy, and showed his anxiety for a moment, but immediately restrained himself. Did she know about the warning he had received?

She swept towards him, her eyes flashing, hands outstretched. "Miserable man, your doom is written on your forehead! I see death in your face. As you have sown, so shall you reap. For every tear you have made me shed you also shall sorrow before you go down into the dark with all your crimes upon you. You are doomed, and you know it."

He laughed. "So it was you who managed by some means or other to obtain that ring and send it to me as a warning? I might have known that it was only a child's trick to frighten me."

"I know of no ring. I sent you no warning. I only warn you now. Don't ask me how I know; but I do. Death is written on your face."

He was awed in spite of his bravado. A chill crept through his veins, for he feared death. All his aims and interests were connected with this world, not the next. He had much to do, much to plot and plan and scheme before he died, several old scores to settle, several accounts to balance, people to punish, money to collect at usurious interest. This woman defied him in a last despairing attempt to assert her old power—the power which had turned the scale, and sent him on the downward path when he was only waiting an excuse to tread it. He would make one last attempt to win her affection. If that failed, then he would tell her about Sadie, and claim that somewhat haughty young lady as his daughter.

"I don't understand all this," he said, with his old imperiousness of manner. "You know well enough that I am not easily frightened, not lightly turned from the path I mean to tread. Your husband is dead, and you know it. If you will marry me, you shall have everything you want. You can go to one of the big cities and enjoy life there with me, instead of being confined to this miserable village where you cannot even show yourself without people talking of your wretched history."

"You forget," she interrupted, "how largely responsible you are for that miserable history, how much you contributed to the making of it."

"That is only your idle fancy. Come, listen to me. You have wept too long. Dry your eyes, and come to my arms. You are not a woman who was meant to weep always, to renounce for ever the joys of life out of imaginary fidelity to an ideal—a weak-minded fellow who did not value you at your proper worth, and was only too glad of an excuse to sever his bonds. He has probably married half a dozen times since he deserted you. You'd far better

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marry me at once, and let the past take care of itself. I can be relentless to all the world but you. You have crossed my life in every way. Our fates are destined to mingle, whether you wish them to do so or not. Let us put the past behind us, enjoy the future. Come!" He held out his hand to her; but she did not take it.

"How can you put the past behind you," she asked, "when all the time it is marring your future? The future bears its punishment for what you have done. I have had mine already; yours is to come."

He laughed. "Oh, it would take a good deal of punishment to have any effect upon me. I haven't any nerves. It is only your men with a sensitive, nervous system who fear a future state. I believe in being alive. Why, I'm as strong as a horse!"

"Your strength doesn't prevent you from shooting at people and then galloping away," she flashed, with a sudden recollection of that scene by the pond.

He laughed again. "Oh, that was merely a warning when I saw you philandering in the moonlight with the Yankee colonel. The next time—should you be unwise

enough to let there be a next time—I shall shoot straight ; and you are aware of my reputation for straight shooting. Barring Old Man, you know, I am the best shot in the Ontario Valley. I thought perhaps that Colonel Burr might take the hint and clear out.”

“I don’t think he is that kind of man. If I were to mention my suspicions to him you would probably pass a very unpleasant quarter of an hour.”

“Oh-h ! In what way ? ”

“I fancy that he would disdain to kill you—to put a bullet through your back ; but he would probably thrash you instead. If this persecution does not cease, I shall appeal to him to do so, stranger though he is.”

Ducaine was angry, and showed his anger pretty plainly. “If you are in such need of a champion, why don’t you employ those two old ruffians in the village to defend you ? ”

“Why ? You question why ? You know very well that I have only to ask, and either of them would shoot you down like a dog. Cannot you understand that I hold

your life in my hands, and that my patience is nearly exhausted?"

Ducaine was startled for the moment. The supreme egotism of the man pointed to only one reason for her forbearance.

"You love me, or you would never have done this."

Her face, without the abhorrent gesture with which she turned away, convinced him of his mistake.

"Love you!—You! I loathe you. I have warned you of what will happen unless you repent and make restitution for all the wrongs you have done me. If you choose to brave the matter out, you must be prepared to face the consequences."

"Ah! but there is another little thing on which you have not reckoned," he sneered. "It might, perhaps, be just as well for Sadie to know that, in helping you to set your gang of ruffians to work to wipe me out, she would also be helping them to murder her father!"

Mrs. Vankleek smiled incredulously. "Her father? Isn't it rather childish to start an absurd story like that?"

"Yes; her father. Here is the document

which will prove it. If you promise to return it to me you shall read it, not otherwise."

"Oh, I promise. You forget with whom you are dealing. Give it to me, please."

Mrs. Vankleek ran her eyes hastily over the paper until she came to the signature at the bottom.

"Poor Janie!" she said, "poor Janie! Now I know why my heart always turned to her. Is she aware of this? Why didn't she come to me?"

"Janie is in bed with a bullet wound in her arm. We don't know how she got it. She says it was an accident. The doctor thinks that she's had a shock of some sort."

"My daughter! oh, my daughter! I must go to her. You are not lying to me? She is really ill? Poor Sadie, too!"

Ducaine saw what a trump card was in his hand. "Of course, you cannot enter my house unless you accede to my conditions. Come as my wife, or not at all. If you will agree to this, you shall see Janie in half an hour."

For a moment Mrs. Vankleek was torn

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with doubts. She yearned to see Janie, to watch over her, to know what was the matter with her child. And Sadie?—that other daughter! The girl who had been her one joy and comfort all these years! What would she say to the terrible news? And how reconcile herself to Ducaine, whom she detested?

The question was settled by Sadie softly entering the room. "Don't fret, mother," she said gently. "We're none of us to blame for this horrible freak of fate. I will go to Janie. There is no necessity for you to set foot in the house."

Ducaine saw his trump card slipping away from him. He had just proved Sadie to be his own daughter, and could not very well forbid her the house.

"You take the matter lightly enough," he said. "One would think that you were in the habit of discovering a parent every day."

"Such a parent would be rare at any time," retorted Sadie, crossing over to the woman who was no longer her mother. "You mustn't expect too much from me at first. I've hated you all my life, and

loved your victim. You can't expect me to veer round all at once, and protest my undying love and affection for you when I haven't any. The situation is a little hard on us all. If it hadn't been for you, it would never have arisen. You are quite sure that this document is genuine?"

She picked up the paper and carefully inspected it. Instead of being angry at her remarks about himself, Ducaïne looked at her with new-born admiration. Her hand did not shake, the colour remained in her cheeks, her manner was as cool and composed as if her future did not depend upon the result of this scrutiny. When she had thoroughly digested its contents, her eyes wandered from Mrs. Vankleek to the Judge, from the Judge to Mrs. Vankleek. She laid down the paper on the table, and put her arms round Mrs. Vankleek.

"There's no help for it, mother. I must go to him at once, and look after Janie." Her voice faltered a little. "It is easier to bear this news because, in any event, I shall not be alone in the world. You will explain everything to Mr. Davenport, and say that, for the present, at any rate, I

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cannot hope to have the pleasure of meeting him. Tell him not to despair."

"I don't think I would do that," gravely interrupted the Judge. "The companion of those thieving old rascals would not be at all a suitable match for you. If he comes near you again, it will be at his own peril."

"I don't think I would complicate matters, if I were you," said Sadie, composedly. "They are bad enough already."

"You must either admit my authority, or I will have nothing whatever to do with you," snapped the Judge.

"Under any other circumstances," retorted Sadie, "I fear that I should gladly welcome the possibility of our continuing to dislike each other. It's the tragedy of life that we should be chained together like this when we would both rather go different ways. Of course, you know I can't leave Janie, or you wouldn't expect me to take any notice of such rubbish. Tell Mr. Davenport, mother, that, for the present, he had better not come near me. I shall be back to see you in a day or two. Now I must break it gently to Wilks."

Wilks stalked scornfully into the room, drawing herself up to her full height. "Just say the word," she implored Mrs. Vankleek. "Just give me leave to get at him, and I'd cheerfully give up a year's wages, the unnatural old villain! I'd make him wish he'd never been born. I ain't afraid of him, and my friends ain't neither. As for takin' my lamb"—she put her arms round Sadie—"into the lion's den, she ain't goin' without me, if I have to batter the place down."

Sadie gently disengaged herself from Wilks's massive embrace.

"Oh, it's all right, Wilks, you old dear. When I want you to chop up any one I'll send for you. But Janie's ill; I must go to her. Your mistress will need all your care and protection. Don't let her out of your sight," she added, in a whisper.

She ran towards Mrs. Vankleek, kissed her again and again, and promised to return shortly.

"Of course, it's all nonsense about my not being your daughter," she said, fervently. "It wouldn't make any difference if I had been changed at nurse a hundred

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times. I love you, and you love me, and that's all there is to be said about it. When," she added, in an audacious whisper—"When I have a home of my own, it will be my turn to adopt you. You can come and help me milk things. Harry will be only too glad. I believe he is a good deal fonder of you than he is of me."

Mrs. Vankleek smiled. "You won't make a very good farmer's wife, Sadie, if you call cows 'things.' I suppose I had better break it to Harry myself. If I don't do so, he will be coming down to besiege the place. Do all you can to help Janie, dear. There is some mystery about the poor child's illness which I cannot fathom."

Sadie jealously held her aloof for a moment.

"Ah! you already care more for her than for me. But of course you do."

"I had," said Mrs. Vankleek, indulging in slang for the first time in her life—"I had to take a 'back seat' when——"

"Oh yes, I know, mother; and I'm not going to be so unreasonable as to expect you to love me better than you do your own flesh and blood. But my dear papa is

waiting for me. I wonder whether 'His Honour' will condescend to carry my satchel."

The Judge stiffly assented to this proposal. Hence it happened that a few minutes later the whole village was startled by the somewhat extraordinary spectacle of Sadie and the Judge walking in the direction of the latter's house, Ducaine bag in hand, and Wilks, also heavily laden, bringing up the rear in a state of such suppressed fury, that she felt it absolutely essential to kick a dog out of the path, instead of walking round the recumbent cur. When the animal had disappeared—a howling, yellow streak—into space, Miss Wilks felt better, and marched grimly on with the air of a prison warder escorting a culprit to execution. Speculation became still wilder when Miss Wilks was observed returning to Mrs. Vankleek's alone. Had Ducaine secretly married Sadie? Was her dislike for him all a sham? Was Janie ill? Was——?"

But Miss Wilks explained matters to the assembled villagers with such effect that Davenport immediately posted off to Mrs. Vankleek, in company with Colonel Burr,

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to learn the truth. Old Man, listening thoughtfully to Miss Wilks's vigorous rhetoric, felt more embarrassed than ever at this further complication of affairs, and wandered into the Bush to think it out, unconsciously breathing a wish to the swaying pines that a man might know

"The end of this day's business, ere it came!"

He was quite unaware of the poet's contention—

"It sufficeth that the day will end,
And then the end is known."

He wanted to know the end at once. It seemed to him that unless something energetic were done, it might be indefinitely postponed.

CHAPTER XIV.

MISS WILKS WANDERS.

WILKS was missing. The truth gradually dawned upon Mrs. Vankleek that, for at least an hour, Wilks had not entered the sitting-room in order to overwhelm her departed enemy with reproaches and make derogatory allusions to every portion of his frame with all the untrammelled freedom of a child of nature. It was noticed that she had been reclining in a dejected attitude, a white apron over her head, in one corner of the kitchen. Whenever the apron fell, moved by her convulsive sniffs, it was seen that her eyes were red with weeping, that her Medusa-like ringlets were unkempt, uncoiled, limp, and unassertive. Sadie's departure for the enemy's camp had totally confused Miss Wilks, even though her chopper lay on the kitchen dresser, sharp

and ready for emergencies. This defection from within was more than she could cope with or understand. That the child of her affections, the darling of her mature prime, should prove to be the daughter of their common persecutor Ducaine, was more than Miss Wilks could immediately comprehend. She felt that the Roman fortitude wherewith she was wont to regard life had basely deserted her; the air of the kitchen was stifling; she must away to the Bush or burst her laces. Acting upon this conclusion, with her customary promptitude Miss Wilks stole out of the house, crossed the garden, went along the sandy shore towards the Point, and dived into the soothing shade of the trees which fringed the edges of the primeval Bush until, with troubled steps, she came to the serried files of murmuring pines.

The afternoon sun glinted on the boles of the trees and gilded their mossy sides, a little streamlet babbled aimlessly along, soothing her perturbed ears with its infantile chatter; but Miss Wilks was not to be placated by merely mechanical efforts on the part of Nature to put her in tune again.

Her blood boiled within her, she must find some outlet for her pent-up energies. Wandering into a little clearing, she selected a tall, straight young tree, made a scientific notch in it about five feet from the ground, rolled up her sleeves, displaying the brawny arms of a man, raised her chopper with a critical look, and carefully cut out the word "Ducaine" on the smooth bark. Then she stepped back, divested herself of her loose jacket, and brought down the chopper with a crash. Another scientific blow made a huge gash in the unoffending trunk. The splinters began to fly in all directions. Miss Wilks was "witching" her enemy, and meant to do it thoroughly. Had she lived in the Middle Ages she would have made an effigy of him in wax, stuck it full of pins, and melted it before a slow fire. To a woman of her impatient temperament, however, scratching Ducaine's name on a tree, and then hacking down the tree was far more effective. When her foe fell prostrate with a crash, she nimbly skipped out of the way of the breaking branches and wandered on through the Bush with a contented smile. The exertion had done her good, and she was

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temporarily at peace with every one ; except those aggravatingly deceptive persons—Ikey and Old Man.

In the exaltation induced by the imaginary fall of her foe, Miss Wilks totally lost sight of the way by which she had entered the Bush. It was impossible for the sun to filter through these dim, cloistral regions. There was now no streamlet to guide her ; her knowledge of woodcraft was slight ; she was alone in the forest primeval, tired with her deerlike leaps from trunk to trunk, her throat parched with the pungent dust of the dead pines as her huge feet crashed into the fungus-rot of fallen trees—apparently sound—which were covered with luxuriant creepers. Wholly unable to withstand her weight, most of them crumbled away, leaving her with one leg plunged up to the knee in touchwood. It is to be feared that, under these somewhat unpleasant circumstances, Miss Wilks so far forgot herself as to call to mind various expletives of her lonely work-house childhood—expletives which caused a lizard in the path to look at her with bright eyes of mingled reproach and curiosity, and then scuttle away to avoid the contami-

nation of a mixture of cockney English and backwoods slang which could scarcely be called ladylike, although singularly appropriate to the exigencies of the situation.

Exhausted by fatigue, Miss Wilks indignantly plumped herself down on a fallen trunk to reflect. Unfortunately, the tree, although presenting a fair and massive exterior, was even more rotten than the others. She fell backward amid a cloud of wood-dust, which got into her nostrils and made her sneeze, hurt her eyes, and settled on her face with irritating persistency. She was too exhausted to do justice to the occasion, so that she reclined in an exceedingly inelegant attitude—one foot in the air, and the other on the ground, wondering what she should do next. Whilst she was still somewhat vaguely reflecting as to the best course to pursue, her smarting eyelids closed, she nodded dreamily, saved herself with an effort from rolling into the shattered trunk of the pine, turned over, propped her back against a tree, and, with limp arms, head falling forward on her breast, began to fill the quiet air of the forest with resonant snores—snores which caused startled, tiny

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living things to break out from their hiding-places and creep away, trembling with fear, to the inmost recesses of the Bush.

When Miss Wilks awoke, it was nearly night. She felt stiff, and chilly, and uncomfortable; cross, hungry, tired. The rustle of a leaf made her shriek; the pitter-patter of a ground-hog on the narrow deer-track filled her with fear. She had not energy enough even to raise her chopper, as the pretty little animal stopped to sniff at her, and then scurried away to rejoin his family, and tell them of the awesome sight he had just seen. Miss Wilks in full toilette was more majestic than beautiful; but Miss Wilks in the careless *negligé* of the Bush, hair trailing down her shoulders like black snakes, face streaked with decayed wood-dust, eyes swollen and red, had all the terror-inspiring power of a heathen idol—she was indeed gruesome to behold.

But this was no occasion to study appearances. There were "no men to conquer in this wood," and Miss Wilks, as she got up and shook herself, felt that she was wasting her time. Though bold to a fault when confronted with a masculine enemy, she still

retained the prerogative of her sex to start at a shadow, to fear with nameless dread the silence of the dusky pines, to shiver at the breaking of a branch, to jump aside with muttered "Oh-h-h!" at a bit of lichen under the impression that it was a coiled snake. A little wind began to stir among the pines; their solemn branches waved slowly towards her, just like—as she recalled with a thrill of old childish terror—the "ostridge feathers" she had once witnessed decorating a funeral in St. Mary Axe. If some one did not soon come to her relief, a rotten trunk must be her coffin.

Overcome with terror, she hurried on; one foot bursting from its huge shoe, the other hot and blistered. Suddenly, the stately colonnades of pines grew thinner, converged to a central point, then separated and formed a ring around a little clearing. Miss Wilks hastened forward with a shout of joy, casting the terrors born of hunger and gloom to the four winds of heaven. She was herself again, and dauntlessly defied the spirits of the woods, the wraiths of the dead trees, which had come out to haunt her. Here was a little clearing, doubtless on the way to

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the Four Corners. She would find the path, hurry swiftly home, slip quietly up to her room, and pretend to have been asleep all the afternoon. Here was the clear---! Good heavens! What was that in the centre?

She sat down in a limp, confused heap on the ground; for, wandering in a circle, she had returned to the scene of her chopping exploit of some hours ago. The fallen tree lay just where she had left it, with its white chips scattered around, and oozing gummy tears. The pale splinters of the top of the upright trunk, which she had fashioned into a rude likeness of Ducaine, grinned at her in most ghastly fashion. His revenge had come. Miss Wilks was utterly unnerved with that complete physical collapse induced by the combined effects of hunger and superstition.

"Well," she muttered, "some one's got to give way; and if it's to be me, guess I'll have another go at that grinning image there, before I cave in."

She approached the tree with uplifted chopper, but the permanent grin on the rude semblance of a face paralyzed her.

"It's no use," she cried. "I guess it's got the bulge on me this time; I may go wand'rin' round the wilderness for the rest of my life, only to come back here to be grinned at."

She cast her jacket over the top of the stump, and sank down at its foot in an attitude of profound dejection.

"I can't do anything more for myself," she reasoned, her huge hands clasping her knees. "I might go round here till the Judgment Day, spoilin' my clothes and not comin' any nearer the mark. No, I'll stop here. If any one does take the trouble to look for me, I may as well be presentable. I expect I'll git light-headed presently, and begin to cry. Fancy me cryin'!" She waved one hand appealingly round. "Me! the strongest woman at Four Corners or any other corners. Me cryin'—just acause I ain't had no supper. Bah! It makes one want to be back agin in Simmery Axe workhouse, where I was dragged up and never had a good meal to eat, 'cept when the Guardians was comin' round to ask if we'd got enough. I can remember to this day how shiny the yellow soap made me.

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Don't wash your face in front of me, or I'll
throw a chip at you."

This remark was addressed to a beautiful
little chipmunk which ran across the clear-
ing, stopped half-way, sat up on its tiny
haunches, and began to wash its face with
an air of being very much at home, which
was exceedingly aggravating to the per-
turbed Miss Wilks.

"You know very well I can't wash,"
continued Miss Wilks, glad to hear the
sound of her own voice in this vast solitude,
although it sounded harsh and cracked, as
if it belonged to some one else. "But I
can do my hair, and I'm goin' to, chipmunk
or no chipmunk, supper or no supper. They
may as well find me tidy when I've gone
under. I always thought I'd make a fine
corpse; but I didn't know the time was so
near or I'd have put on my best things afore
I come out."

She took a comb from her pocket, un-
fastened the remainder of her hair which
had not already escaped from its confine-
ment, and composedly began to relieve it of
the dust and dead leaves and twigs which

had accumulated there during the course of her peregrinations.

"Now," she said, with a sigh of satisfaction, when she had finished this somewhat protracted ceremony, "if I could only wash my face before I die, I shouldn't feel so bad. I look like an Injun afore he's finished puttin' on his war paint. When I'm dead and gone, even Old Man might wish he'd been more civil, the—the old rip. Or'nary times I'd have plenty of names to lay my tongue to for him, but I don't seem up to it to-night. Shouldn't be s'prised if there's Injuns about. I'd rather like to settle a few. 'Twould be something real after all these ghosts and lizards and snakes and dead trees and things."

If there were any Indians about, they prudently kept out of the way; Miss Wilks's reputation as "The - White - Squaw - who - splits - skulls - with - a - Tomahawk" having travelled far and wide among the Iroquois and Hurons and other kindred tribes. As the night grew darker, she plucked up spirit enough to return to one of the dead trees, bring back some branches, and light a fire in the centre of the clearing. Some wild

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thoughts of setting fire to a whole trunk, and of allowing herself to be consumed on the top of it, floated through her mind ; but, after mature deliberation, she came to the conclusion that it was not worth while. Perhaps at daybreak she might be able to find her way out of the Bush and return home in safety. Stimulated by this hope, she dragged dead branches and touchwood to the stump in the clearing and set fire to it. If the counterfeit presentment of her enemy wouldn't burn, at any rate she could scorch it. She was occupied for nearly an hour in accumulating enough fuel for the night, and lay down to sleep beside the roaring fire with a convenient block for a pillow, hard enough to have dislocated the neck of any ordinary woman. When she awoke, chilled in every limb, the fire was low. Some one—he seemed doubly tall in the dim light—stood leaning on his rifle, and looking down upon her with a humorous grin.

Miss Wilks disguised her relief, threw some more wood on the fire, shook herself, and sat up.

" Well ? " she asked aggressively. " What

do you mean by disturbin' a lady at this time of night? 'Tain't time to git up yet, is it?"

"Wal!" returned Old Man, composedly sitting down on the other side of the fire. "Wal, this licks Creation. I didn't know you'd taken to campin' out, 'ithout a tent neither. Ain't you nigh froze to death?"

"No, I ain't. You might say good evenin', at any rate," snapped Miss Wilks, recovering her spirits and dissembling her joy.

"Good evenin'," said Old Man, dryly, looking into the fire, and throwing some more wood upon it.

"What are you doin' here?" inquired Miss Wilks, hoping to find that he had been looking for her.

"Trav'lin' round. Jest trav'lin' round," answered Old Man, in indifferent accents, as if it were the most ordinary thing for him to be in the depths of the Bush at that time of night, and again relapsing into silence.

Miss Wilks threw another log on the fire, and wondered inwardly whether Old Man carried anything eatable about with him.

Old Man was the first to break the silence.

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"Bin choppin' wood?" he asked, glancing at the prostrate pine.

"Ye—es."

"Healthy exercise," observed Old Man. "Healthy exercise. Folk do say the smell of gum's good for rheumatics."

"Hain't got any," retorted Miss Wilks, provoked at not finding out whether Old Man was prepared to minister to her necessities.

"Sorter gives one an appetite," continued Old Man, indifferently. "Axes is better for this sort of work than choppers. Had any supper?"

"N—no."

"Hungry?"

"N—no."

"I was jest agoin' to camp," slowly drawled Old Man. "Jest agoin' to camp when I see your fire. If you ain't no objections I'll broil thisyer deer's meat on them ashes. I've got a water-bottle an' a hunk of corn bread."

Miss Wilks nodded a graceful assent. She was not going to ask Old Man for any supper, though consumed with fierce longing for the want of it. Besides, how

could she confess to this past master in woodcraft—the man who could tell you which way a horse got up or a cow sat down, this oracle of the Bush—that she had lost her way, was half dead from hunger and grief, and would have sacrificed all she possessed in the world for a couple of pounds of venison and a drink of water?

Old Man made deliberate preparations for his supper without noticing her disquiet. He stuck a long splinter through the juicy steak and put it over the ashes, with an occasional turn towards Miss Wilks, until the ineffable fragrance of it stole up her starving nostrils and nearly reduced her to madness. Her hand moved convulsively towards her chopper, as if she meant to brain Old Man and take away the food. His only answer to this was to give the meat another twist, which caused so exquisite a smell to mingle with the piney odours of the night that she burst into tears.

“For God’s sake, give it me! Give it me! I ain’t had nothin’ since breakfast,” she cried. “I’m ’most dead! I’m ’most dead!”

Old Man, to all intents and purposes utterly unmoved by this outburst, placed the meat on a huge chunk of corn bread and drew his clasp knife.

"It's all yours on one condition," he said slowly. "I don't like to sorter take advantage of your extremities" (Miss Wilks thought that he alluded to her feet, and hastily tucked them under her dress), "but deer meat's deer meat, an' the value of it goes up accordin' to circumstances. You understand?"

Miss Wilks did not understand, but nodded faintly. By this time she was past reasoning. She would have sold herself body and soul to the devil, to be able to reach out her hand to the meat, clutch it, rend it, cram it into her mouth, and clutch, and eat, and rend again, until every fibre of it had disappeared. The odour of it made her faint and sick; her eyes swam with tears. It was cruel of Old Man to torture her thus. She was ready to promise him anything, to do anything rather than remain hungry. Even Old Man looked somewhat moved at the sight of her pale face.

"It's only this," he said. "Not bein' a vain kind of man, so to speak, an' not bein' a marryin' kind of man, I'd like it to be understood as you'll agree to marry the man I picks out for you. You've got the whole village by the ears; it's time you settled down. You ain't as young as you was," continued Old Man, carelessly waving the meat about until its appetizing odour smote upon her greedy nostrils with renewed force—"You ain't as young as you was, by no manner of means; but you're a fine-lookin' woman for all that, an' thar won't be no peace an' quietness atween friends till you gits sorter settled down. If you'll promise to marry the man I picks out, you shall have your supper, an' I'll take you home agin; otherwise, I'm very much afraid I'll have to eat thisyer meat myself whiles you finds your way out of the Bush."

Miss Wilks shook her head and shut her eyes. Even in this extremity she was not going to be forced into marrying some one for whom she did not care. She loved Old Man with all the force of her rugged nature, although Ikey would have made an

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acceptable husband, had there been no Old Man to eclipse him. She shook her head, rocked herself to and fro by the fire, groaned, and motioned him to go away.

"I'm real sorry," said Old Man compassionately, as he wrapped up the bread and meat, and slowly rose from the ground. "I'm real sorry to leave an old friend like you, Miss Wilks, under such circumstances. Real sorry; but 'tain't no use. You've got such a proud spirit thar ain't no doin' nothin' with you under or'nary circumstances. I'll never git such a chance agin. Good night."

By this time he had gathered up his belongings, and was slowly moving towards the black mass of Bush a few yards away. Miss Wilks endured agonies of indecision. Now she understood why Esau sold his birthright for a mess of pottage; why starving men and women are not reasonable beings; why one half of the world is occupied in eating up the other half. In another moment, Old Man would be lost to view in the black Bush. He stood, his face turned towards her, half in the shadow and half in the light. She was too agitated

to notice its expression, or the twitching of his lips.

"Anything! anything! Oh, my God!" she cried. "Give me to eat. Let me eat, eat, eat! I—I'm dyin' of hunger. There's somethin' gnawin' me to pieces. I promise. I promise. Anything! anything! Only take away this awful pain—this awful pain!"

In a second Old Man was by her side, supporting her head on his arm, and giving her to drink from his flask. Then he cut pieces of meat and bread, and made her eat them slowly; restraining her ravenous haste, as if she were a little child, his lips still twitching, whilst he made feeble jokes, or smoothed back her hair with grim tenderness.

When the eating and drinking had come to an end, Miss Wilks lay back in his strong arms with a sigh of relief. The blackness of the night, the hoot of a passing owl, the little murmur amid the wind-swept boughs, were all pleasant accompaniments to her sense of physical satisfaction. She was in the arms of the man she loved. For the moment, she quite forgot that he

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had never declared his love for her. She did not see him draw one of her snaky tresses across his lips with that same half-quizzical, half-tender smile which his face had worn for some time. She only knew that he had found her out, had ministered to her; that he was hers for the time being; that nothing else mattered. It might rain or hail or thunder, trees crash down and kill them where she lay, but she was not at all concerned. Annihilation with the man she loved was far better than living without him. Only one pang oppressed her at this supreme moment. She was not clad in the gorgeous raiment befitting so momentous an occasion.

Old Man was the first to realize the situation. With masculine delicacy, he propped Miss Wilks up against a log, and bashfully retreated to the other side of the fire.

"'Reckon we'd better be movin' soon,'" he said. "I'll take you down to the edge of the Bush, an' then put right out home. No one'll know, 'cept you an' me, how I found you. I don't need to ask you to remember your promise. You ain't the

sort of woman to say a thing an' go back on it."

"I ain't," declared Miss Wilks; "not me. You've took a mean advantage of me, Old Man, but I'll stick to it."

"You think 'twas kinder mean?" asked Old Man, gazing into the fire.

"All-fired mean," repeated Miss Wilks, firmly.

Old Man threw a few sticks on the fire in an embarrassed manner.

"Maybe you ain't old enough to remember," he jerked out, still looking into the fire, as if he saw faces there, "when me an' Ikey was little bareheaded-uns a-runnin' round wild an' gittin' into tarnation mischief everywhar?"

"No," she said, glad of an excuse for talking, and seeing that it would postpone their departure for a little while.

"Wal, Ikey bein' a venturesome chap, with no father to larrup him," continued Old Man, "his mother sorter made me a present of him to bring up. After she died, he lived in my hut, an' I larruped him when he wanted it, which was frequent. Frequent," continued Old Man, musingly.

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"He's got to thinkin' of me as a kind of yearthly providence. I've humoured an' larruped him all my life, an' he kinder expects, if he wants anything, I'll git it for him, an' go on gittin' things for him for the rest of my days."

"Ye—es?"

"So, you see, when Ikey's wanted a thing, an' I've wanted a thing," pleaded Old Man, with quiet earnestness, "I've mostly larruped him an' took it myself. But now thar's come a time when he's real dead sot on suthin', an' I'm dead sot on it too, an' one of us has got to give way."

"Ye—es?"

"Seems sorter hoggish to go on larrupin' a chap as ain't so strong as yourself," mused Old Man, still gazing into the fire. "Seems sorter hoggish to sit opposite the chap you've brought up, an' larruped all your life, an' know he's kinder dreadin' suthin' to happen. Suthin' as'll change his days, an' take the—the sunshine out of 'em. Now, s'posin' you was me, an' Ikey an' me both wanted to git suthin' very much, an' I was to come to you an' say, 'Tain't easy to give up what I want; but

it'll settle Ikey if he don't git what he wants,' wouldn't you think a darned sight more of me if I was to let Ikey have it?"

There was dead silence for a moment, as Miss Wilks realized what had happened. This strong man was prepared to live loveless, childless, solitary days for the sake of the little fellow who had nestled on his heart as a boy, who had shared his hut like a brother, and who had looked up to him with unwavering faith ever since he could remember anything.

"'T would sorter knock Ikey off his basis," Old Man resumed, with a humorous twinkle in his eye. "Sorter squash him, so to speak, if he was to think I didn't own the universe, an' couldn't git it for him; if he was to find I've bin playin' it low down on him for some time. It's only fair an' square, as between man an' man, to let him have what he wants. I ain't the sorter chap to git married, I ain't. I've restless fits, an' have to be off to the Bush, an' camp out under the stars by myself. No decent woman 'ud put up with a hog like me. Now, Ikey, he's a man is Ikey—a man as 'ud pay for bein' washed an' dressed up; I shouldn't.

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An' so," continued Old Man somewhat lamely, "you'll kinder understand he's the man you've promised to connubialize with when I gives the word."

"We'd better be goin'," said Miss Wilks, limply. "See, the fire's out."

"Yes," said Old Man, without looking at her; "I guess it's nearly out this time."

The forlorn woman slowly rose to her weary feet, walked round to his side of the dying fire, laid her cold lips to his for a second, then seized him in her arms, kissed his eyes, his lips, his hair, pushed him roughly away from her, and returned to the realities of everyday life.

"You ain't thought much of me, I reckon," she said brusquely; "but we'll let that pass. I'm tired; I ain't got no one to lean on."

Old Man supported her limping steps to the edge of the clearing.

"Is it far?" asked Miss Wilks, who could scarcely drag one foot after the other.

"About a matter of two miles," said Old Man.

Miss Wilks turned upon him like a wounded panther.

"If I'd known that, I wouldn't have promised."

"I was tryin' to forgit it myself," said Old Man.

* * * * *

The grey dawn came up out of the East as Miss Wilks crawled into the house and crept softly to bed. Left to himself, Old Man returned to the little clearing, sat down by the deserted fire and began to rake aimlessly among its cold ashes for the vestige of any flame. By the time he had finished his task, the sunlight flooded the tops of the trees, the birds sang, the soft west wind ruffled the surface of the river into glad little ripples; but there was no summer morn in the heart of Old Man.

"I must keep that little cuss from findin' out about it," he said, stamping on the cold ashes, "or he'll be makin' a fuss, an' I'll have to larrup him agin. It's sorter time he settled down."

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CHAPTER XV.

"NEMESIS."

THE Judge was covered by three revolvers, and sat perfectly still; for the raising of a finger on his part meant instant death. He ground his teeth with rage that he should have allowed himself to be so surprised; that he had neglected the warning which had been given him; that he was now in the power of his enemies. For once in his life, Ducaine had been doing something praiseworthy; he had spent the night by Janie's bedside as she tossed about in delirium or lay in dull stupor, her unseeing eyes upturned to the ceiling. Sadie, worn out with watching, had stolen away at day-break for an hour's rest, and had then returned to relieve Ducaine who, feeling extremely tired, went to sleep downstairs



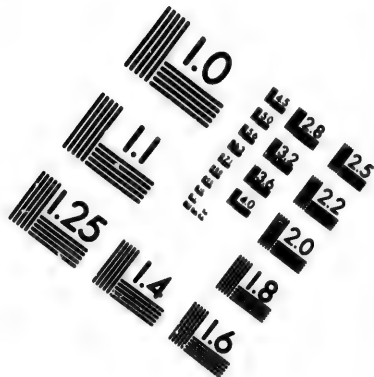
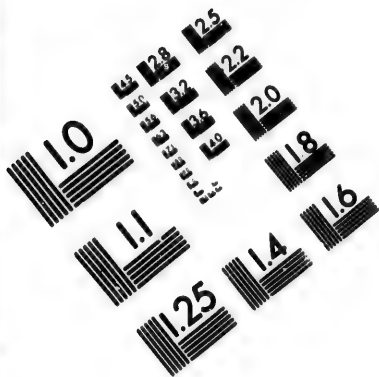
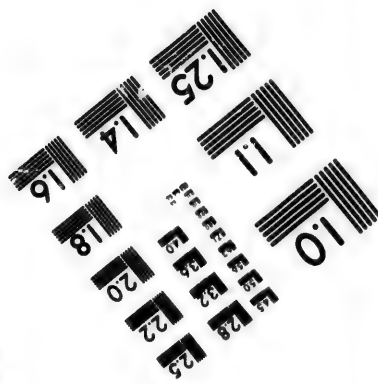
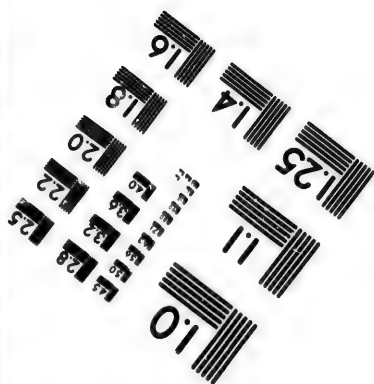
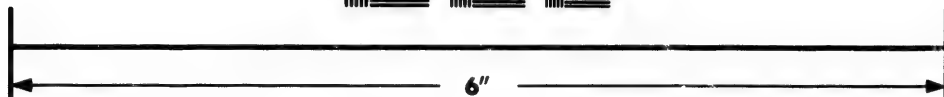
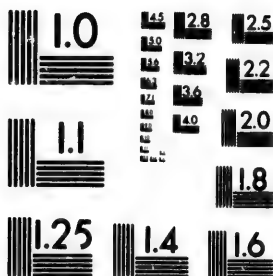


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in his study in an armchair, close to the glass door which opened out upon the lawn.

This was absurdly rash on his part; but want of sleep had diminished his caution. Any one on the lawn could have sent a bullet into him from the cover of the shrubs which came close up to the window. But, for the moment, he was not thinking of revolvers. He had actually discovered that he was fonder of Janie than he knew; that he did not wish her to die. Her frenzied references to "Skeeter Joe" puzzled him; for he was connected with the dead boy by a tie which was not generally known—a tie which the poor lad's mother had not thought fit to ratify in the manner usually exacted by society. If Janie were fool enough to be fond of the graceless whelp, he must do something for the lad instead of leaving him to make vain attempts to scale the heights of Parnassus in rags.

Ducaine was aroused from these half-waking, half-sleeping reflections by a sudden cry of "Throw up your hands." From force of habit he threw them up, before realizing who were his assailants. It was

not until Ikey slipped into the room and dexterously secured his revolver that he knew what had happened. Ikey was followed by Old Man, Old Man by Colonel Burr. Even at this perilous moment, Ducaine reflected that it was like the Colonel's cursed impudence to meddle in local questions with which he, as a stranger to all the winning ways of Four Corner folk, could have no possible concern. But he was speedily destined to be undeceived on this and several other points.

"You seem to be in a hurry, gentlemen," he said gravely. "May I ask what is the meaning of this unwarrantable intrusion at such an hour of the morning? You generally 'hold up' people under the cover of night."

"Gol' darn your impudence, Judge," said the usually phlegmatic Ikey. "We've come on business; an' we've been waitin' for you all night till you was free to attend to us. We didn't want to disturb that poor sick girl. She'll have all she kin do to wrastle through as it is, 'ithout our worryin' her."

"Has this--this gentleman"—the Judge looked at Burr with instinctive antipathy—

"also come on business? He seems to handle a revolver rather awkwardly."

"Guess he's sorter dropped in on business too," said Old Man, who was leaning idly against the doorway with the air of one who was only a disinterested spectator. "Fact is, we've all come on business—pretty stiff business, too. Hadn't we better sit down, Judge, an' git it over?"

"'Tisn't the hour I'd have chosen myself," said Ducaine, roughly. "However, as you are here, you old ruffian, I can't help myself. Sit down. The sooner it's settled the better."

Old Man, with an air of placid enjoyment, gently revolved something suspiciously like a quid in his lean jaws.

"I wouldn't waste breath in recriminations if I was you, Judge. Maybe it'll all be wanted afore we've done with you."

He moved carelessly to the table and sat down, facing the Judge. At a sign from him Ikey left the door, and took up a position on Ducaine's right; Colonel Burr stood beside Old Man with the air of one who was very much at home, and intended to stop there.

The Judge was puzzled. If they meant killing him, now that they had him at a disadvantage, why did not they do so at once and get it over, instead of going through the transparent farce of discussing things? Under similar circumstances he would have acted first and considered afterwards. Looking at it impartially, it seemed to him that he was in a very tight place—a very tight place indeed. The only thing to be done was to see the situation through. Any movement on his part would mean something unpleasant at once; whereas if he temporized, he might be able to devise some means of escape from this exceedingly awkward predicament. Reassured that no immediate violence was intended, the judicial dignity of years came to his aid. He drew himself up in his chair, and motioned to Colonel Burr to take a seat.

Burr shook his head. "I only sit in the house of my friends," he said. "You're——"

Old Man motioned to him to be silent. For a little while the three men made no sign, all of them appearing to be immersed in unpleasant reflections. Colonel Burr

seemed buried in thought, and Ikey played with a paper-cutter on the table. Presently Old Man, rousing himself from his abstraction, pulled an inkstand towards him, put some foolscap sheets in front of it—as he had seen the Judge do after taking his place in court—and, with a persuasive smile, announced that he was ready to begin.

“Begin what?” asked Ducaine. “I don’t recognize any right on your part to break into my house and go through this farce. If you have a grievance, out with it, and get it over. You are three to one,” he added with a bitter smile; “otherwise, gentlemen, I should be very happy to try conclusions with you. Very happy, indeed.”

“Oh, we’re comin’ to conclusions soon enuff, Judge,” cheerfully returned Old Man, trying one of Ducaine’s best quill pens on his thumb-nail. “We’re comin’ to conclusions fast enuff, an’ we ain’t three to one neither. We’re five hundred to one.”

“W—what?”

“Five hundred to one,” said Ikey, feeling that it was about time for him to take part in the conversation. “If you was to shoot the three of us—which in course you can’t,

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seein' as I've got your six-shooter—an' walk out of that window or that door, you'd run plum centre into some one else who'd bring you back agin; an' when you'd killed another three, the same thing 'ud happen."

"Oh!" The Judge understood. "Lynch law? That's what you're after, is it? Well, I don't recognize your authority, or admit it in any way. If you've made up your minds to murder me, you may as well get it over. It's just what might have been expected from a thieving set of scoundrels and bogus colonels like you. Murder away and be done with it!"

"Oh, we ain't goin' to murder you," cheerfully returned Old Man. "We ain't goin' to murder you, not by no manner of means. You've had a fair an' square warnin,' though you didn't deserve it, to look out; an' you ain't looked out worth a cent—that's all. But it's goin' to be all fair an' square, with the usual formalities of Mister Justice Lynch. You bein' a la'yer kin look after yourself, Judge. Ikey, bring the jury in from the bushes, an' tell 'em if they disturb Miss Janie comin' in, I'll larrup the life out of the lot of 'em."

Ikey went quietly out and returned with a dozen bearded men, all armed to the teeth, who followed in his wake, their boots leaving muddy marks on the carpet. At a sign from Old Man, Ikey improvised a kind of jury-box by putting two rows of chairs against the window. At another sign from Old Man, the jury dropped quietly into their places, each cheerfully nodding at the top of the table with a "Mornin', Judge." Out of deference to Old Man's wish to conduct the proceedings with a proper amount of decorum, they had all put on their coats; one man, who was unanimously selected as foreman, had come in a white turndown collar. To the initiated, this collar was as terrible as the black cap used by a judge when sentencing prisoners to death. Once it was donned, its wearer wanted blood. Ducaine alone was ignorant of this fact. Not so Old Man, who was extremely averse from anticipating the result of the impending trial. He went quietly up to Isra'l Moss, the wearer of the collar, unfastened it, and threw the offending article into the Judge's waste-paper basket.

"When Justice Lynch is sittin', he don't allow no personal prederlickshuns," he observed quietly. "You keep that thing off till you've done your work, Isra'l Moss. Now, Judge, if you're ready, we'll begin."

At this moment Sadie entered the room, and looked round, startled to find herself in the presence of so many men. "What d'you want?" sharply asked the Judge. "I'm busy over the voting lists, and must not be disturbed."

"That's so, Miss Sadie," said Old Man, lying in his customary truthful way. "We're gittin' through it as quietly as possible, so's not to disturb Miss Janie. I don't see how we kin let in that German from over the Ridge, Judge. He's only a squatter, an' a bad 'un at that."

"You would like some breakfast brought in?" Sadie asked the Judge. She had seen the jury stalking slowly across the lawn, and knew very well that her newly found father was the object of many a bitter hatred.

"No, thank you; not just yet," returned Ducaine. "I've a little more than I can swallow this morning, Sadie. There's a lot

to be done, with a very little time in which to do it. Isn't that so, Mr. Evans?"

"You bet, Miss Sadie. When the Judge says a thing, it's so," responded Old Man; and Sadie withdrew, satisfied that her vague uneasiness was without foundation.

Old Man again sat down. "Judge, jest cast your eye along thar. D'you challenge any of theseyer men?"

The Judge looked at the jury sharply. He had wronged most of them at one time or another; but he knew that it would be impossible to select another jury without finding others whom he had injured still more grievously. Loans at high interest, sudden foreclosures of mortgages, unwarrantable evictions—all these were to be laid to his account by the dozen. He shrugged his shoulders indifferently. "No; I should like one more man on the jury, that's all," he said suddenly.

Old Man looked at the jury. The jury nodded affirmatively. "Who is it?" he asked Ducaine.

"Harry Davenport."

"Ain't a member of the Vigilance Committee," returned Isra'l Moss. "Thisyer's

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a Vigilance business, and don't yer forget it." He was still feeling sore that his cherished collar should have been taken away. The loss had reduced him to the condition of a mere ordinary individual, now that there was nothing of the pomp and panoply of office about him.

Old Man nodded peremptorily at Moss. "You shet up. That's so, Judge."

"It doesn't matter, then," said Ducaine, indifferently. He had made this proposal with a conviction that Sadie would never marry a man who had assisted in lynching her father. "Twelve will do. Personally, I wouldn't believe one of you on oath; but that is a mere detail. You all know that this is a farce, and that you have already doomed me to death."

If Ducaine wished to anger his judges into sudden action to vindicate the purity of their motives, he was unsuccessful. They all sat there, looking at him with a placid indifference beneath which it was impossible to discern the accumulated hatred of years. Somehow this appearance of dignified impartiality was far more impressive than any exhibition of anger.

The Judge recognized that they had come there to do something; that no amount of "bluffing" on his part would prevent them from acting as they wished.

"I don't admit your authority in any way," he said; "but I am in your power—you can do what you like. It might be as well to remember that things will be made pretty hot for you if a Government official like myself is murdered in cold blood."

"Thar, thar!" returned Old Man, "you allers was a thoughtful man; but don't you worry about us, Judge. Things'll be hot enough for most of us some day, an' a little hotter or colder don't make much difference. Why can't you wait till the purceedin's is opened? Now then, gentlemen of the jury, you swar on thisyer Holy Book—four of you at a time, each hold a corner, an' then pass it on to t'others—you'll well and truly try the issooes set afore you, an' a true verdict render in accordance with the facts, so help you God."

The jury gravely kissed the Bible handed to them by Ikey, and settled down to

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business. They were practical men accus-
tomed to practical issues, and proposed to
act accordingly.

"As president of thisyer court," said
Old Man, "I ain't a-goin' to inflame your
minds with any hifalutin' nonsense. All
Judge Lynch wants is to git down to bed-
rock facts—that's what he's for. When
the law of the land allows a man to go
unpunished, Judge Lynch takes a look inter
the business, gits his witnesses together,
an' puts in a little healthy work with a
tree an' a rope. Thar ain't no nonsense
about appealin' to thisyer court, or thatyer
court. Judge Lynch is final; he don't
make mistakes; and when his work's done
it's too late to alter it. Now, gentlemen,
git to work. The prisoner kin defend
himself well enuff, so you needn't trouble
your heads about that. He's chockful of
learnin'."

The jury nodded. As a rule they did
not trouble themselves to take notes of a
case. In this instance, however, they re-
garded the paper before the president with
evident satisfaction. He was putting a
good deal of tone into the proceedings, and

it was a pleasure to them to feel that the dignity of Judge Lynch was safe in his hands. As Old Man had hinted, legal subtleties were not for them; their work was final and beyond appeal.

"What's the charge agin the pris'ner?" asked Isra'l Moss, without ceasing to chew, and unbuttoning the neck of his now collarless shirt.

"Sev'ral," answered Old Man, gravely. "They're mostly about one man, though—Colonel Vankleek."

Ducaine looked up with an amused smile. Surely the jury were not going into the question of his relations with the late lamented Vankleek.

"In the name of Judge Lynch," continued Old Man, "I charge this man with stealin' the infant child of Colonel Vankleek of this village on the night of the eleventh of September, 1829. In the name of Judge Lynch, I further charge him with lyin' to Colonel Vankleek about the sex of thisyer infant—it bein' a girl—an' drivin' him out of the country on the strength of it. In the name of Judge Lynch, I charge him with shootin' at the said Colonel Vankleek

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with intent to murder him on the night of the dance at Tollevants's barn. In the name of Judge Lynch, I charge him with stealin' the title-deeds of Mrs. Vankleek's property, though the jury needn't pay much attention to that, 'cause I helped to steal 'em back agin from him myself. Thar's about twenty other charges, includin' the sedooing of Skeeter Joe's mother, an' leavin' Skeeter Joe to run wild till the day of his death; but you needn't trouble about them neither. I rather think, though I don't want to influence the jury, as these other charges'll string him up higher'n Nebbychanezzur," concluded Old Man, whose Biblical knowledge was of the most shadowy character.

The Judge—he had listened to Old Man with amused nonchalance—winced at the announcement of Skeeter Joe's death. He had always meant to do something for the lad—when he had time. But that time had never come, and so Skeeter Joe failed to get his chance. Ducaine suddenly realized that the lad would have been helpful to him in the present emergency. Blood was thicker than water, after all, and

Skeeter Joe's romantic temperament would have found full expression in a campaign against his father's foes.

"As I said jest now," continued Old Man, "you don't need to trouble yourselves much about the rest of the charges. You all know the Judge pretty well by this time. He's had his claws into most of us; an' sometimes it's taken a deal of moral 'suasion to git 'em out agin an' fill up the holes."

The Judge smiled sarcastically as he scraped a match on the back of his trousers and lit a full-flavoured cigar.

"I am sorry to interrupt the flow of eloquence from my learned brother on the Bench," he said; "but, gentlemen of the jury, I would remind you that assertion is not evidence; that you, as sensible men, must have adequate"—puff-puff—"testimony before coming to any conclusion in a case of this kind. If I am charged with the crimes enumerated by your worthy Judge, who is not only Judge"—puff-puff—"but also holds a brief for the prosecution, they must be proved. If the alleged crimes are not proved, you will discharge me; and,

if I may venture"—puff-puff—"to dictate to so representative a body of citizens, you will clear out before I make the place too hot to hold you."

Ducaine spoke in his usual forensic manner, with that air of quiet authority which had never yet failed to influence a jury even when every individual member of it knew him to be lying. The jury, visibly impressed, nodded approvingly; but Old Man waved his hand to them, with a fair imitation of the way in which he had seen the Judge do it on similar occasions in open court.

"Gentlemen of the jury, an' you Isra'l Moss in particular, you'll take your rulin' from me, not from the pris'ner at the bar. The evidence is here; if it warn't, I'd go an' git it for you. I'll jest swear on the Bible myself, an' tell you what I know; then we'll call Ikey to corroborate; an' then"—he paused, with the air of a man who has a grand *coup* to make, but wishes to do it quietly and without ostentation—"why, then, we'll call Colonel Vankleek himself."

"W-what!" The Judge leapt to his

feet with an oath. *Now* he understood who had sent him the ring.

"Pris'ner, sit down; you don't need to git excited," said Old Man, preparing to administer the oath to himself with quiet enjoyment. Then came his evidence; how he had been overtaken by the storm on that memorable night when Ducaine abducted Vankleek's child; how he had been passed by Ducaine, and had followed him to Mrs. Vankleek's, and then to Vankleek's hut in the village; how he had kept this knowledge to himself, not even sharing it with the faithful Ikey, lest that individual should incautiously proceed to reprisals; and how, finally, he had strolled into the Bush on the night of Tollevants's dance just in time to see Ducaine fire at Colonel Vankleek and gallop off.

"But Colonel Burr was with Mrs. Vankleek," urged Isra'l Moss. "You said so yourself, jest now."

"Colonel Burr is Colonel Vankleek," said Old Man, quietly. "Here he is, to speak for himself."

Ducaine half-rose from his chair as Vankleek came forward. For an instant the

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two men looked each other full in the face ;
then Ducaine nodded with an amused smile.

"It's Vankleek, sure enough," he said.
"I admit his identity now. I felt sure I
had seen him before. Any one who knew
him might have guessed that, instead of
seeking redress as man to man from any
one by whom he imagined himself to have
been injured, he would have taken shelter
behind some one else. You can take his
evidence as read, gentlemen of the jury.
I cannot fight against this combination."

Old Man again motioned to Vankleek
to sit down, at the same time casting a
significant look towards Ikey, to prevent
the two men from springing at each
other.

"I onderstand, Judge," he said to
Ducaine, "you admit the truth of these
charges brought agin you. If you've any-
thing to say, let the jury have it. It's
gittin' near breakfast time, an' we've bin
up all night waitin' for you."

"Oh, very well; I won't keep you any
longer than I can help." Ducaine turned
his chair round so as to face the jury. "I
don't know that it is worth while troubling

you with the facts in this case, gentlemen of the jury," he said, as if directing them from the bench. "You will remember, in considering the decision at which you may arrive—although I do not for one instant admit your right to try me under any circumstances whatever—that the whole affair is a purely personal one of private and not public wrong, if wrong there be. The enmity between Colonel Vankleek and myself is the matter of a lifetime, and should be settled by ourselves. It is not for you to lay down the relations which should subsist between two men who have both loved the same woman. A couple of revolvers would make far better umpires. Personally, as I have just said, I do not recognize your right to interfere at all, and I should take no part in the proceedings—except this compulsory one—were it not that Colonel Vankleek's pusillanimity is worthy of this publicity. If I have injured him in any way, there is a code beyond the laws of the land—a code which demands an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth—which recognizes that every gentleman should be the arbiter of his personal honour, and not

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bring the matter before such a tribunal as this. Of course, if you wish for the paltry satisfaction of hanging me because of any little personal grievances you may have against me, I think it only right to inform you that such a proceeding would be very illogical indeed, as the issues before you have been most clearly defined by the oblique-eyed old scoundrel, who calls himself Judge Lynch. It is a source of great regret to me that, should your verdict be adverse, it deprives me of any opportunity of testing his skill as a marksman. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to defy the law, which I have so long administered, and which he has so persistently eluded, in order to put a bullet into his lean old carcase. That also is another matter of private vengeance, and not for the public good. In any event, gentlemen of the jury, in consideration of your thoughtfulness in not disturbing me all night when I was watching by the bedside of a sick girl, it will give me great pleasure if you will breakfast with me before the termination of your somewhat high-handed and illegal proceedings."

The jury were about to assent to this proposal with cheerful alacrity, when Vankleek came forward, and, addressing Old Man, asked if he might be permitted to make a proposition to the jury.

"Personally I ain't no objection," said Old Man. "Bein' president of thisyer court, I can't take no notice of any deflections on my own grit. You, bein' only a witness, are free, if the jury wishes it, to make any remarks afore they proceeds to extremities."

Old Man spoke rather disgustedly, as if there were something in Ducaine's contention that the affair should have been settled out of court. It was a reflection on his judgment for listening to the Vigilance Committee instead of taking matters into his own hands.

The jury nodded an impatient assent. They were eager to get to business, and then to breakfast. The possibility that this might be his last meal on earth did not appear to trouble Ducaine in the least. His determined face was lit up by a smile of contempt for Vankleek, the jury, Old Man, and Ikey. His own inward reflection

was that he ought to have "skipped" long ago while he had the chance.

Vankleek rose from his chair and gravely addressed the jury. "Gentlemen, I have been absent from my native village for more than twenty years. God knows that I should never have left it, had it not been for the villainy of this man before you. We were friends. Friends! How he has construed the meaning of friendship I need not explain to you. I have paid dearly enough for my own folly and weakness. I gather that my coming back has brought matters to a head; that you made up your minds you could no longer tolerate this man among you; that he must be tried and punished. I was reluctant to allow private vengeance to take precedence of public justice; but, gentlemen, ever since I entered this room I have had the intention of making a proposition to you. The time has now come to make it. My vengeance should take priority over your justice. This man, partly through my own inexcusable stupidity, partly through my good-nature and credulity, has wrought me the bitterest

wrongs that one man can inflict upon another. These wrongs can only be wiped out by the death of one of us. Throughout my life I have too often neglected duties which I should have performed; but this is an imperative duty which I cannot—nay, which I dare not—neglect. Under the circumstances there is but one way out of it, and that is a duel to the death. With your permission, gentlemen, I make the following proposal to this man here, who has sinned more or less against us all. To-night will be dark, the moon scarcely visible. I think, gentlemen, that you all know Millette's bar-room."

The jury, who were becoming rather impatient, brightened up at this remark. They all knew Millette's bar-room; several of them almost lived there.

"There is, as you are aware, gentlemen, an entrance at each end. The room is about thirty feet long and fifteen wide."

The jury nodded, many of them remembering that these dimensions had not been spacious enough to prevent their sudden egress in moments of playful inebriation.

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Vankleek, with the utmost *sang-froid*, "that at nine o'clock to-night Judge Ducaine and myself, each armed with a six-shooter, shall enter that bar-room, he from the north end, I from the south, the room itself to be in absolute darkness. At ten o'clock, and not before, you can also enter and see what has happened. This plan will preclude any necessity for your now giving a verdict. If I fall, Judge Ducaine is not to be called upon to account for the past; if he dies, there is no more to be said."

To the jury, the plan seemed an eminently practical one. They were quite ready to take the responsibility of stringing Ducaine up to the nearest tree; but this duel in the dark offered possibilities of a far more exciting nature. They consulted together, and appealed to Old Man, whose impassive face had momentarily brightened with a gleam of satisfaction when Vankleek made his proposal.

"I've no objections," said Old Man thoughtfully, "though it ain't fair on Colonel Vankleek. The Judge is second-best shot for twenty miles around. Thar's only one man can beat him in gittin' the

drop on anybody, an' that's me. Personally, I'd rather wade in at him myself, but Colonel Vankleek's got first call. Bein' in the dark might even up matters a bit. If the Judge gits the best of it, an' breaks out agin arterwards, we can always lynch him on his new record."

The jury, recognizing the eminent probability of again getting Ducaine into their hands, cordially assented. Ducaine nodded cheerfully in response to their questioning looks.

"I haven't had any pistol-practice for a long time, gentlemen," he said; "but nothing will give me greater pleasure. I shall consider myself a private citizen, and endeavour to live up to the traditions which have made this little village renowned throughout the Ottawa Valley. And now, gentlemen, to breakfast. Let us save our friend Mr. Evans the necessity for adjourning this court by doing it ourselves."

Vankleek hurriedly left the house. He had much to do before the evening, and must secure his wife and child against Ducaine at any cost. Ikey mournfully regarded him as he hurried away, and

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beckoned Old Man into a corner of the garden. For the first time in his life he really doubted his leader's wisdom.

"Any one kin see Ducaine'll plug him first go off," he said. "Much better have strung up Ducaine 'ithout any fuss, an' gone home to our own breakfast. A bellyful of bullets 'll be the breakfast he'll give us some day. If Ducaine gits clear, we'll be plugged for sure. I'd borrowed a new coat—a reg'lar clawhammer," continued Ikey mournfully; "an' thar'll be no chance to show off in it if we're wiped out too."

"What colour?" asked Old Man.

"Black."

"Black's a good enuff colour. What's the matter with it for a fun'ral?"

"Yes, but you can't go to yer own fun'ral in a borrowed coat."

"Why not? If I'm spared, Ikey, I'll have you wrapped up in it; it shan't be wasted."

Ikey did not seem at all grateful for this tender thoughtfulness on the part of Old Man.

"Vankleek's a blamed fool for fightin' at

all," he grumbled. "Not but what we sha'n't see some fun. I'll have to keep clear of Miss Wilks till to-night, or she'll git it all out of me. Vankleek's sure to be killed, an' I've——"

"You shet up. Ikey, you make me tired. Ain't I brought you up outer the wilderness, so to speak, an' made you the man you are?"

Ikey looked at himself disparagingly. "'Tain't much to be proud of. I'd have made a better job of it myself."

"Shet up, or I'll larrup you 'ithin an inch of your life."

"All right," said Ikey. "I fires when you fires."

Old Man grinned. "Not to-night."

He bent down, whispered something in Ikey's ear, and went into breakfast with his enemy as serenely as if they had been bosom-friends from their youth up.

"Wal, I'm—consid'rably astonished!" said Ikey, a broader grin than Old Man's spreading over his expansive features. "I'm—con—sid—'rably as—ton—ished! Robinson Crusoe ain't in it with that man. An' to think as a worm like me was saucin' him

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CHAPTER XVI.

A DUEL IN THE DARK.

ABOUT seven o'clock that evening Sadie received a message from the Judge, requesting her to come down into his study, as he wanted to see her on a matter of importance. Fortunately, Janie had taken a turn for the better and was now peacefully sleeping her way back to health and strength, after the painful ordeal through which she had so recently passed. Sadie was a little surprised at the receipt of this message, for there had been a wild breakfast to Mr. Justice Lynch and his friends, and as the somewhat noisy guests had not confined themselves to drinking tea, it had taxed all her resources to keep them from disturbing Janie. Had she not known of the Judge's anxiety for Janie's welfare, she would have felt inclined to wonder at his seeming

carelessness. Hastily placing the coverlet more carefully round the sick girl's form, Sadie darkened the blind by pinning a heavy rug in front of it, to obscure the rapidly waning light still further, and went down to the study.

"You wanted to see me, father?" she asked, feeling that she must recognize the inevitable and endeavour to make the best of their relations.

The Judge smiled genially at her and drew forward a chair.

"Come in, Sadie. I'm going away to-night, and may not be back for some time. But I've been thinking over your position in the event of my not returning. It has just occurred to me that I ought not to take you away from the friends of a lifetime without making you some compensation. It's a pretty rough world for a woman at the best of times, and some of us generally manage to make it rougher. I ought to provide for you in some way."

Sadie held up her hand deprecatingly. "It is very good of you to consider me; but I don't think we understand each other yet."

"Of course we don't. That's why I

wanted to have a talk with you." He got up from his chair and paced restlessly about the room. "Sadie, why did that cursed Irishwoman take you away from me?" he burst out at last. "Things might have been different if she hadn't mixed you two girls up in such a stupid way. With a strong nature like yours beside me, perhaps I might have pulled up in time."

Sadie went to him, laying one hand on his arm. "Sit down and talk to me about it. Perhaps it is the best thing, after all. I might be able to make peace between my mo—Mrs. Vankleek and you."

Ducaine returned to the fireplace and sat down. "Of course I am talking to you as I would to myself, Sadie. For years I have looked upon you as an enemy—an enemy I admired, but still an enemy. Now things may possibly happen which will necessitate a long absence on my part. We may not meet again for years. Of course I am not sufficiently unreasonable to expect you to side with me in this business between the Vankleeks and myself. It began before you were born; it has marred my life; and things are coming to a crisis."

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Sadie reflected. "Can't matters be arranged? Why not make restitution to Mrs. Vankleek?" She tried to put it delicately. "Get rid of all these money matters in dispute between you. You have plenty of money, even if you are in the right."

Ducaine waved aside the money part of the business. He had only used it as a means to an end without really intending to go to extremities.

"You don't know that Vankleek has come back?" he asked suddenly.

"W-wha-at?"

"Yes; he has come back. Moreover, he has found out that it was I who sent him away."

"Wittingly?"

"Oh yes; I wanted him to go. When people are in my way I generally manage to get rid of them by some means or other."

The girl made a gesture of abhorrence. "And you're not sorry?"

"Well, not particularly as regards Vankleek. I don't much mind about his suffering. He was always rather an egotist, and a very bad-tempered one too."

"Ah, but if you could have seen all that Mrs. Vankleek has gone through! If you were not utterly relentless you would pity her. And now there is an added misery." Sadie wildly wrung her hands. "There's Colonel Burr. I am sure she——"

The girl stopped, feeling that she had no right even to mention such a surmise to Mrs. Vankleek's persistent suitor.

"Finish what you were going to say. You feel sure that she is in love with Colonel Burr. Well, Sadie, this alleged Colonel Burr is Colonel Vankleek. He has come back, after years of wandering up and down on the face of the earth, in order to win her heart again. Goodness knows what he has been doing in the mean time, or how many wives he has had elsewhere. But Ulysses has returned to his patient Penelope and the consequent slaying of the suitors. Only, the weapon will be a six-shooter instead of a bow and arrows, and of course Ulysses will fire his shot into the heart of the persistent suitor."

He stopped, fearing that he might have betrayed what was about to happen. A glance at Sadie reassured him. She was lost in perplexity.

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"Will he reveal the truth to her soon?" she asked. "Shall I—would you like me to—to tell her? She must know sooner or later. It is cruel to keep her in suspense."

"You can tell her to-morrow. One more day of weeping will not add much to the sum total. I shall not know definitely until to-morrow about my contemplated journey; but I am surrounded by enemies, and it may be as well to keep clear of them for a time."

"Hadn't I"—the girl paused, trying not to feel the sacrifice she was making—"hadn't I better come with you?"

"You!"

"Yes; you are my father."

"I am the enemy of all you love and care for most in the world."

"You repent—you are sorry—you will not harm them any more. Tell me that, father, and I shall see a little light in this unhappy business."

The Judge pushed back her arms. "Come, come, Sadie; I don't repent. You should know me better than that. I loved Mrs. Vankleek. Another man got her. I did my best to win her back, but failed. There

are a few other trifling actions in my life for which people are anxious to call me to account. I don't repent. How can a man in lusty health and with a perfect digestion repent, when he knows in his heart that if he had succeeded, repentance would never have entered his head? Repentance and indigestion are generally synonymous terms. You ought to know that I'm no coward. But I am surrounded by enemies who may make things very unpleasant for me. Knowing this, I want to thank you for the affection you have shown me, although it must have gone sorely against the grain."

"It is so hard!" the girl murmured. "So hard! All my interests in life seem to be reversed. I don't love the others any less; but I want you all to be friends. I can speak to Harry. He——" She stopped.

"He is tied hand and foot by Old Man and Ikey. He can't detach himself from them; and, if he could, the result would be the same. Old Man is the only fellow in the universe of whom I am afraid. When I have settled with Vankleek, there will always be Old Man. He never sleeps; he is never at a loss for some desperate

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"I will go to him. I——"

"My dear girl, you will not do anything of the sort. I am only telling you all this because I wish you to understand the situation. It is a toss-up as to how I come out of this affair; and, whatever happens between Vankleek and myself, there is always Old Man behind him; Ikey behind Old Man. You mustn't suppose that I am afraid because I realize the odds against me. But, in the event of my not returning to-morrow, here are certain papers which I wish to hand over to you. You are at liberty to keep them if I cannot elude my enemies. That is all."

Sadie dropped the papers on the floor. A presentiment of coming misfortune seized upon her as she gazed at this handsome, vigorous man.

"I ought to hate you," she said; "but you are my father. I cannot do it. I am

not going to make terms with you. If my lover is what I take him to be, he will wait for me. To-night we will go away together to some quiet place where Vankleek's vengeance cannot follow us. There we can begin life anew. I will make this sacrifice if you will consent to—to act honourably to your fellows. You have splendid genius, father; every one, even the people who hate you, says that you can do anything on which you set your mind."

"Except get the one thing I want. Sadie, you are a good girl. You would really come away with me, and give up your lover for a time?"

The girl did not flinch. "He would wait fifty years for me if need be. We love each other; we are all the world to each other; we haven't a thought apart from each other. But, rather than desert you, I will give up this heaven of mine until you have made a fresh start in life. Of course it will cost me something, but"—she took him by the shoulders and gazed into his face—"you are worth a sacrifice, father. If one woman has been the means of wrecking your life, another may yet save it. Let us

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get away from all this bloodshed and murder; give back with one hand what you have taken with the other, and all will yet be well. We will slip away quietly to-night, without any one seeing us. I can send a message to Wilks to look after Janie."

The Judge gently took her hands away from his shoulders, and gazed into the girl's flashing eyes with an expression of half-humorous tenderness.

"Confound it all, Sadie! why didn't that Irishwoman own up sooner? We'll talk this over again to-morrow. Take the papers with you, and run off to Janie again."

Sadie picked up the papers, and Ducaine kissed her for the first time in his life as he drew her towards the door.

"If I were you I wouldn't bother my head about an old villain like me," he said with a smile. "I haven't any conscience at all, Sadie. You would soon tire of me, and want to return to your lover."

His hand was on the door. A vague trouble overwhelmed her.

"If you could only feel sorry about it all!" she whispered.

"Ah! but I can't to-night. And I don't feel at all humble. When I am brought to my knees, then I may think about it. Run away now, there's a good girl. You have over-tired yourself. We will talk about this to-morrow."

After this resolute exhibition of impenitence, Ducaine kissed her again.

"I am rather proud of you already," he said quizzically. "Confound that Irish-woman! Now, don't let me be interrupted for the rest of the evening."

After Sadie had gone away, the Judge hurriedly examined his revolver, took out the old cartridges, slipped in fresh ones, and thrust the weapon into his hip-pocket. Then he lit a cigar, looked round the room with a careless nod of farewell, as if it were within the bounds of possibility that he might not see it again, and went out towards the village.

Any one passing Millette's tavern that night would have imagined that the inn-keeper had retired to bed early; for there was not a light to be seen (save the feeble

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flicker of a lantern under the elm-trees in front of the saloon), as the Judge leisurely strolled up to a small group of men who awaited his approach. A little lower down, Colonel Vankleek and Old Man lounged about as if they were in no particular hurry, but merely wished to kill time—or something. When Ducaine approached the group, and carelessly lifted his hat, Vankleek slightly raised his in return.

"It's about a quarter to nine, gentlemen," said the Judge, looking at his watch by the dim light of the lantern. "I presume we begin on the first stroke of the clock?"

Isra'l Moss nodded. "That's so, Judge. Revolver all right?"

"Oh, I guess it's pretty well fixed," said the Judge, indifferently. "What will you take for that colt of yours—the bay with the white star?"

"I'll let you know to-morrow, Judge," said the phlegmatic Moss, "if thar's any needcessity."

"He will make a good roadster." The Judge threw away his cigar. "Let me see, I believe I take this end."

Moss motioned to Vankleek to approach.

"Thar's to be no hanky-panky," he said sternly. "On the first stroke of nine from the church clock, you each slip in an' shut the doors. We'll look back about ten to see how you've got on. One six-shooter each."

Vankleek and the Judge bowed. "Take Colonel Vankleek round to his end, Old Man," said Moss; "I'll look arter the Judge."

He disappeared in the darkness with Ducaine as Old Man took Vankleek by the arm and led him round to the other end of the building.

"Thar's five minutes yet," said Old Man to Vankleek, fumbling about with something in his hand.

"What's that sickening smell?" asked Vankleek, taking up his station at the door. "You know what to do if he kills me?"

Old Man nodded. "Oh, thisyer smellin' stuff," he said indifferently. "Miss Wilks give it me for my hankercher. It'll steady your nerves, Colonel. Jest sniff an'——"

Vankleek turned away with an expression of disgust. As he did so, Old Man gripped

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him with an arm of iron, crammed the handkerchief into his mouth and nostrils, and held it tightly there in an agony of impatience. "If that Injun didn't lie to me," he muttered, "this blessed stinkweed stuff orter to quieten him in half a minute. Gewhillikins! I didn't know he was as strong as all this."

In about thirty seconds the potent fumes of the Indian drug began to act. When Vankleek ceased to struggle, Old Man gently lowered him to the ground. "He'll be all right agin in an hour or so," he muttered. "If I've any luck I'll be able to explain when I come out; if I don't come out, the hankercher'll explain for me. Moss knows what that stinkin' Injun stuff is as well as I do." He chuckled noiselessly. "It's a good thing I told Ikey Miss Wilks wanted to see him, or he'd have been along too, an' I couldn't ha' done it. That blamed clock's a long time strikin'. They orter dock the parson for—— Ah! there it is. Now!"

He slipped into the room, and closed the door behind him.

Scarcely had he entered when "crack-crack" went the revolvers! Then, silence!

Old Isra'l Moss, phlegmatically smoking his pipe on a stump under the trees, waited until the clock struck ten. "Time's up," he said, shaking out the ashes. "Now, gentlemen of the jury, are you thar?"

The gentlemen of the jury had beguiled the time by a friendly game of euchre at Laviolette's. They now came straggling along with a couple of lanterns. The betting was ten to one on the Judge, although public opinion strongly favoured Vankleek.

"Now," said Moss, "give me a lantern, an' I'll open the door. Come in. . . . Hullo! . . . Well, I'm——!"

The jury eagerly followed him in to where Ducaine lay dead on the saloon floor, face downward. Moss turned him over and found a small hole where the bullet had entered between the eyes. Old Man was propped up against the wall on the left-hand side of the saloon, breathing heavily.

"He's given me one in the shoulder, boys," he said affably, "seein' as I let him have first shot."

"What's thisyer foolishness?" demanded Moss, angrily. "Why did you take a hand? 'Twasn't your fun'ral."

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"I've got five shots left," said Old Man, significantly. "You knew as well as I did Vankleek hadn't a chance. I suffocated him with Injun stinkweed. You'll find him lyin' out thar on the grass. Bring him in, an' give us both some whisky. I've most bled to death whiles you was snorin' out thar. Go an' git Doc Higginson quick, to plug me up."

Vankleek was brought in, and Old Man's wound speedily attended to.

"It'll heal up in a week," he said indifferently. "'Tain't no use your raisin' a shine, Vankleek. If he'd potted you he was bound to have a go at me arterwards, so I thought I might as well come first. Whar's Ikey? Oh, thar you are. Hope you had a good time with Miss Wilks. Now you've bin fool enuff to hurry away down here, you kin carry me home, Ikey. I'm all right, you old idgeot." And, by way of conclusively proving that there was nothing seriously the matter with him, Old Man fainted from loss of blood.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE RETURN OF ULYSSES.

WHEN Vankleek realized what had happened, he was not at all grateful to Old Man for his well-meant interference. This ingratitude Old Man treated with the air of one who was humouring a spoilt child.

"You jest thank your stars you're alive, and he ain't," he said phlegmatically. "Next time you gits into rows of this sort, through your own durned foolishness, I ain't goin' to take a hand. No, sir."

It was in vain Vankleek pointed out that the average length of a man's life did not admit of his making more than one or two trips of twenty years' duration.

"I don't care about that," Old Man answered—"not a cuss. You've caused that dear lady to suffer a heap through your durned foolishness, an' you've jest got to

make your peace with her. If it hadn't bin for your wife, I wouldn't have moved a finger in thisyer business; but when I think of her a-wastin' her days an' nights all these years, sorrowin' over a headstrong young fool as didn't know when he was in clover—why, it makes me wish you was Ikey, so as I could larrup the life out of you."

The Colonel took this vigorous rebuke in good part, and had sense enough to see that it was deserved. Nothing could bring back the twenty years he had wasted; nothing could restore the joy of youth, the strength of early manhood, the hot and eager impetuosity which had once been his. He was now more than middle-aged, a grey-headed man, whose blood flowed calmly and equably, instead of with the fiery speed of twenty years ago. How was he to explain the deception which he had practised on Mrs. Vankleek in appearing before her as an utter stranger, who had still further intensified her sorrows, and added to her perplexities by causing her to fall in love with him? How excuse himself for having played upon the chords

of memory and old association in a thousand little ways which, whilst awakening her interest in him as Colonel Burr, had deepened Mrs. Vankleek's affection for the missing husband who had deserted her so long ago? As Colonel Burr, he had come upon the scene with the avowed intention of endeavouring to win her heart and then reveal his identity; trusting to her joy at his return to make forgiveness an easy task. For some time before his actual reappearance at Four Corners, he had learnt of Ducaine's action with regard to the mortgages on Mrs. Vankleek's property; and the news was an additional incentive for him to punish the Judge for his perfidy, so as to make every reparation in his power to Mrs. Vankleek. It is but justice to this modern Ulysses to mention that nothing but pride and poverty had kept him away from Four Corners for so many years. He could not reconcile it with his own sense of what was due to his wife and himself that he should return penniless, become a pensioner upon her bounty, and be exposed to Ducaine's jeers without an opportunity of resenting them.

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But the years had gone by, one after the other, in a vain pursuit of wealth. He had toiled early and late; risked his life in every imaginable way; turned his hands to all professions and callings; ever seeing before him at the end of laborious days this long-desired reconciliation with his wife, which, rightly or wrongly, he considered it impossible to attain as a poor man. At times he admitted to himself that, if she were disposed to forgive him at all, it would not make the slightest difference to her whether he appeared on the scene in rags or a chariot. He knew how haughty was her pride; how strong her prejudices; and so toiled on, almost insensible of the passing years, in this effort to accumulate money. And, just as he had begun to despair, when it seemed to him that he must end his days as a pauper, unforgiven and unloved, one stroke of luck had effected in twenty-four hours more than all the persistent striving of twenty years. He told himself that it was luck; but in his heart he was dimly conscious that this living of laborious days—this faring scantily among rough associates who valued life so lightly—was really

the expiation which he had been doomed to undergo for the hot-headed folly of his youth.

Then came the thought that sorrow and neglect might have changed his wife's heart towards him ; that she no longer cared for his memory, or wished to be reminded of his existence. If he were to come to her in all the pomp of affluent circumstances, it would seem almost an insult ; and so, in his perplexity, he had made himself known to Old Man, with strict injunctions that his secret was not to be shared even with the faithful Ikey—a somewhat superfluous precaution ; for that unreasoning individual was not in the habit of troubling himself as to the why and the wherefore of his friend's actions. " I fires when Old Man fires," was his motto ; and if Old Man had told him to blow Miss Wilks's head off, he would have done so under the firm impression that when the proper time came his friend could restore it to its original state without an effort. Hence, when told by Old Man to prepare for the attack on the coach, Ikey had cheerfully borne his part in the affray without the slightest curiosity as to what it all meant ;

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save and except that there was a very good prospect of making the Judge exceedingly uncomfortable. When the fact was revealed to him that Colonel Burr and Colonel Vankleek were one and the same person, he accepted it with unquestioning faith; and had Old Man at any time intimated that natural equity demanded the effacement of Vankleek, he would have obeyed him without a murmur, and with a thoroughness—Ikey was very thorough when he once got an idea into his head—which would have caused Vankleek to fare badly.

But recent events, without lessening Ikey's faith in Old Man's infallibility, had somewhat confused him; for, though on amorous thoughts intent, he scorned to be disloyal to Old Man, whom he strongly suspected of cherishing similar sentiments to his own for Miss Wilks. Once or twice he had clumsily attempted to lead the conversation in the direction of matrimony; but his ineffectual hints were easily parried by Old Man with the simple remark that matrimony is like some medicines, which never work in the same way on two different people: sometimes they have the desired

effect, and sometimes they kill the patient whom they are intended to benefit. "An' the worst of it is," added Old Man, "till you've swallowed the dose you don't know how it's goin' to turn out."

The last of these conversations had taken place on the afternoon of the day on which the followers of Judge Lynch had paid their unceremonious visit to Ducaine's house. Sadie, aware of the Judge's projected absence, was not alarmed the next morning when she heard that he had not returned on the previous evening. All unconscious of his tragic end, she went down to Mrs. Vankleek's in order to give her the latest report about Janie's condition. Her visit was a very short one. As she came away from Mrs. Vankleek's she met Colonel Burr, whose usual imperturbable air had given place to a slightly flurried manner. He seemed very anxious to know whether Mrs. Vankleek had been out that morning, and was reassured to learn that she and Miss Wilks were both on the premises.

"I don't know what's the matter with Wilks," added Sadie. "She has been crying her eyes out, and then wanting to

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know what colour would suit her best to wear at a wedding. She has strong tendencies towards pea-green silk, but cannot make up her mind about it."

Vankleek laughed somewhat mechanically. "Oh, I'll see her, and throw a little light upon the subject. I haven't quite made up my mind yet who is to be the happy man. It seems rather a toss-up. I'd better buy her something with plenty of colour in it. Wilks has had an eye for colour all her life. That is why she leans to Old Man. He's the more picturesque of the two."

Sadie laughed, nodded gaily, and went towards the gate. Directly she reached it Vankleek's manner changed. He nervously hurried into the hall and laid hold of Wilks, who happened to be passing at the moment. "For God's sake, Wilks, run after Miss Sadie, and see that she does not hear anything suddenly about her father. He was killed last night in a duel with Old Man."

He hurriedly recounted the circumstances under which Old Man had taken his own place, thrust Miss Wilks through the open doorway, and watched her speeding after Sadie with ungainly strides. Then he

crossed the hall, opened a little door on the left, and found himself in Mrs. Vankleek's morning-room.

It thrilled him to the heart to find how little this favourite room of hers had changed during his long absence. There were tokens of himself scattered all round—a hat flung carelessly on a little side-table as if it were still waiting for him to come in and pick it up; a pair of gloves lay on a bracket—moth-eaten, time-worn gloves, but of a peculiar material affected by himself long ago. A faded daguerreotype, almost unrecognizable, but which he knew was meant to be a likeness of himself, stood on the desk. It needed no second glance to assure him that Colonel Burr would have a hard struggle to successfully out-rival the missing Vankleek. Would it be worth while to make the experiment? It seemed to him that if he were to attempt it in this particular room, such a proceeding would be little less than an outrage on good taste and good feeling alike.

Almost unconsciously he sat down in a battered old chair which still remained where it had always been. He had once

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had a peculiar trick of leaning back in this chair with legs crossed and hands clasped behind his head. Once again in this old chair, the force of habit reasserted itself. Mrs. Vankleek, on entering the room, was shocked and surprised to find him there, in an attitude which was painfully familiar to her.

"No one told me you were here," she said rather haughtily. "I am not in the habit of receiving visitors in this room. It is sacred to the memory of my husband." Then she stopped and looked at him intently. "If you don't mind, Colonel Burr, I would rather you came into another room." His attitude jarred upon her.

It seemed as if this man had not only stolen her heart but was already usurping privileges which had been sacred to another.

Burr got up from the chair. "I beg your pardon, Mrs. Vankleek. The fact is, I have something rather important to say to you this morning; and, with your permission, it seems to me that this is the best place for me to say what I have to tell you."

She stopped him with a little gesture of entreaty.

"Is it absolutely necessary that you should say anything further? The last time we met, something about you tempted me to a momentary weakness. I was dull and lonely—tired of shadows—tired of this dim, grey, loveless world. Forget it. We all of us make mistakes for which we must afterwards suffer. For the moment, you caused me to forget; there was something about you which reminded me——"

Burr moved a step nearer towards Mrs. Vankleek; but she put one hand behind her, groping backward on the desk until her fingers touched the faded portrait of himself. The contact seemed to give her strength and comfort as her fingers closed convulsively around the frame.

"We all have to cheat ourselves with shadows," he said. "I had hoped that you might learn to love me for myself, though I see that, at the best, 'twould be but stepping into a dead man's shoes. He would always come between us; this luxury of grief which has robbed your cheeks of their colour and tinged your hair with grey is part of your being. You have forgotten how to smile; and now, when I would tear

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this sombre pall of grief away, you prevent me from mere force of habit. I offer you love, life, sunshine, warmth——"

"Ah!" she interrupted, "you forget how long I have lived in the shadows. You don't know how I sit and watch and wait for some one who never comes, who may never come; some one whom I loved, and with whom I quarrelled—foolishly quarrelled. It is difficult to say, now, which of us was the more foolish and absurd in our stupid temper and pride. I sometimes think that all the unhappiness of the world, of all the men and women in it, comes from quarrels about things which gradually grow into great ones, until one forgets how small they were at first."

"And so," he said, taking up his hat, "you would rather go back to your world of shadows to dream of this brute who pretended that he loved you?"

"He was my husband."

"Who quarrelled with you, and ill-treated you."

"I was harsh to him also."

"Who went away in search of other loves."

"He was the father of my child."

"Who has left you all these years without a sign."

She stopped him with a radiant smile. "Ah, no, he hasn't. Sleeping and waking he is still with me. I hear his footsteps on the stairs, his voice within my ears."

"And so you can't escape from him even now. Must it always be so?"

"Yes," she answered; "it must always be so."

"Yet you smiled upon me, and led me to hope."

"Must I tell you why?"

"Yes."

"It was"—she hesitated, as if fearing to make herself ridiculous in his eyes—"It was because your every movement, the intonations of your voice, reminded me of him. Now I know why you brought me out of the kingdom of dreams and shadows. You must have met my husband and unconsciously copied his movements, his every trick of speech, except that your voice is graver and thinner, and you so rarely smile. At one time he always smiled, until he grew

angry and distrustful, and went away. That is the reason I liked you."

He came nearer and knelt at her feet. "Don't you know me now?" he asked, with hands uplifted to hers.

"You!—you!—you have come back?"

"I have come back—come back to ask you to forgive."

"Forgive!—Forgive!—Forgive you all the wasted years which can never come back? Where is my husband? *You* are not the man. What have you done with him? He had a sunny smile upon his lips. He wasn't a grey-bearded man, solemn and slow of speech. Where is my husband? Give me back my husband, in all his beautiful youth and manhood. You are an old man."

"Yes," he answered sadly; "I am Ulysses—an old, old man. I have wandered far and wide, but my lost youth has remained with you, and I come back after many years to ask you to restore it to me."

"No, no. You are—not—my—hus—!" She swayed forward over the kneeling figure at her feet.

Burr—let us call him Vankleek—was just

in time to catch her; to lavish tender kisses on her lips and cheeks, upon the loosened tresses of her hair. At the pressure of his arms, the touch of his lips on hers, she came back to life with the little shuddering sigh of one who reluctantly returns from dreams to waking.

"And you never saw our little child? Can you forgive yourself that? It had blue eyes—they took it away from me. I lost you both for a time. Is it—is it really you?"

"You—you know me now, dearest? You know me now?"

Yes, she knew; and, womanlike, forgave him for the mad folly of his manhood; womanlike, she drew him to the shelter of her tender breast, this grey-bearded, grizzled man, her once beautiful youth; womanlike, she welcomed her returned prodigal from out the dim shadows of the bygone years, and smiled and wept, and wept and smiled, to find the fetters with which she had held him in the past unbroken still, though rusted with her tears.

CHAPTER XVIII.

DAVID AND JONATHAN.

THREE months later, Ikey and Old Man sat in their cabin eating the last evening meal which they were destined to share together for some time. Ikey had made superhuman efforts to do justice to the occasion; but it was evident that his soul was not in the work, for he allowed the meat to burn; and the coffee—on the perfection of which he was wont to pride himself—was so weak that Old Man had to reverse their usual rôles and attend to the making of it himself.

“If you think, Ikey, 'cause you're goin' to git married to-morrow, as I'm to put up with thisyer sort of thing, you're mistaken,” he said blandly. “Arter bringin' you up all these years, I don't want to have my spirit broke by bad food. You jest sit down

an' wade in for all you're worth. Most likely it's the last meal you'll ever eat in peace an' quietness this side of the grave; don't throw away such a chance, or you'll sit on the ash-barrel of affliction an' be sorry for it."

Ikey grinned sheepishly. All his gibes about matrimony were steadily recoiling on his own devoted head.

Old Man made some fresh coffee. "Thar, that ain't hogwash. Now give me that steak. I'll show you how to cook."

Ikey handed him the meat in silence.

"You can't give yer mind to it—that's what's the matter with you," declared Old Man. "I knew what 'twould be when you took to sweepin' out the place every day, an' layin' in all that soap. You're transmogrifyin' yourself, Ikey—that's what you're doin'; an' it won't wash. You ain't bin partik'larly fond of washin' yourself ever since I've known you, and you never will be."

Ikey sheepishly held out his plate for more food. He found it easier to make a pretence of eating than to talk.

"You've bin a-jeerin' at me," resumed

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Old Man, giving his own steak a scientific twist as the gravy fell through the gridiron and sputtered on the wood ashes below. "You've bin a-cryin', 'Go up, thou bald-head,' so to speak, for a long time, an' the she-bears of matrimony has got hold of you at last." (Old Man always became a little confused when seeking to apply Biblical legends to modern instances.) "A few months ago this place was that cumferable, people 'ud come miles to stay with us an' think nothin' of curlin' 'emselves up on the floor for the night; until you was dum fool enuff to go an' buy that feather bed, an' nearly chuck 'em into it. Now we've put on style, an' got a bit of store carpet down, an' stinkin' flowers, an' white muslin curtains—white muslin curtains with blue ribbons—in the winders, folk won't touch us with a ten-foot pole. They've got their suspicions, Ikey, as you're a reformed character. It's my belief, if I wasn't round, you'd git shot at ten times a day, jest for paintin' that front door blue an' white. It's a public insult to folk as ha'n't any paint handy an' can't afford to git married. If it was any one else you

was goin' to marry, they'd lynch you right off. Gaoler Grey told me, this arternoon, he'd seen you buyin' yaller gloves an' a blue tie over at Miller's store. I had to bluff him you was gittin' 'em as a present for me."

"I was thinkin'," faltered Ikey, "of wearin' suthin' tasty for the weddin'."

Old Man nearly let his meat fall into the fire.

"To think," he said, in tones of withering disgust, "you don't know better'n that. D'you s'pose I'm a-goin' to let you disgrace me by gittin' married in yaller gloves! Why, you might as well turn yourself into a yaller dog at once."

"Me bein' a ginger man, it did seem sorter nat'ral," pleaded Ikey.

"Oh-h! Maybe you was also allowin' to git married in that butternut suit of yours too?" queried Old Man, with scathing scorn.

"It did seem to go with the gloves; an' Miss Wilks, she give me a yaller handkerchief to hang out of my coat pocket—sorter keerless."

This time language failed Old Man

wherewith to express the intensity of his disgust. He went on eating silently. "If you'd come to church rigged up like that," he said at last, with solemn conviction, "the boys 'ud have tarred and feathered you; an' I'd have helped 'em."

"What was I to do?" urged Ikey. "I'd spent all my spare cash in a dress for the bride."

"Which is jest like your dum foolishness, when you heard the Colonel say he was a-goin' to do it."

Ikey gazed doggedly into the fire. "I ain't a-goin' to 'low no colonels to take a hand in thisyer weddin'," he said obstinately. "Whenever I gits married, I reckons on doin' that kind of thing myself."

Old Man was too much occupied with his own thoughts to seize this opening. He went to the cupboard and dragged out a bundle.

"I was down to Hawklesbury yesterday," he said, "an', knowin' the partikler kind of man you are, I went into a little speckerlation on my own account. I ain't a-goin' to be disgraced by no yaller-glove weddin'. You jest put down your plate an' try on them things."

Ikey slowly opened the bundle and took up the black suit it contained.

"A reg'lar clawhammer! A clawhammer, Old Man! Me married in a clawhammer an' black britches with a stripe down the seams! Won't it be slingin' on too much style altogether? Won't it knock the bride all of a heap?"

"Wal, ain't a woman like that worth bein' knocked all of a heap?" demanded Old Man. "Air you a-goin' to sink down in that woman's eyes by wearin' yaller gloves? No, sir. You put on them black britches an' clawhammer to once, or I'll drill a hole in yer."

Ikey immediately proceeded to divest himself of his own garments and slowly pulled on the trousers and coat with childish delight.

"Thar's a white shirt with a frill, an' white tie, an' shiney boots you could see to shave in, if you ever did shave—which you don't," said Old Man, producing the remaining contents of the bundle. "You'd better not try on theseyer lavender gloves now, in case you busts 'em."

"What!" gasped Ikey. "Shiney boots!

Bin turnin' road-agent?" He could not conceive of any man being millionaire enough to purchase such things under ordinary circumstances.

Old Man had spent every available dollar to buy this expensive suit. He had even taken over the butternut-coloured clothes to the tailor at Hawklesbury in order that there should be no mistake as to the fit.

"Oh, I jest yanked 'em in," he said indifferently. "Now git out of 'em, an I'll cut your hair."

Ikey docilely obeyed and resumed his own everyday garb, too overwhelmed by the splendour of the wedding clothes to utter articulate thanks to Old Man, who took up a pair of shears and began to clip at the ginger-hued locks which straggled down the nape of Ikey's tanned neck.

"Better make it pretty short," diffidently suggested Ikey, as the click of the shears broke the stillness. "I don't want no scalplock as anybody could lay hold of."

In his conscientious desire to do away with this difficulty, Old Man cut Ikey's hair so very short that the skin showed through

in several places, greatly to the future bridegroom's discomfort.

"I didn't want it mowed," he said testily. "You allers was a powerful hand with the shears, Old Man."

"You'll look ten years younger," retorted Old Man, "when you git into them clothes. People'll take you for a strange parson."

"D—do you think she'll know me?" nervously queried Ikey. "Thar ain't no chance of her a-goin' off with the wrong man? She's a powerful-minded female is Miss Wilks."

"If," said Old Man, with sudden twinkles in his eyes, "you don't stop theseyer inspersions on Mrs. Isaac Marston, *née* Miss Wilks——"

"What's she got to neigh for?"

"Oh, it's a way of describin' people, that's all. If you don't stop theseyer inspersions on her, I'll marry her myself."

Silenced by this threat, Ikey went on packing up the clawhammer coat. This done, he resumed his seat by the other side of the stove and handed his tobacco cake to Old Man, who chopped off some

fragments from the solid mass, sliced them up, and put them in his pipe.

"You'll git out of the way till Miss Sadie an' Davenport is married," said Old Man, presently. "Then it'll be your turn. I've paid Miller five dollars to keep an eye on you all day, an' give you away at the altar. An', whatever you do, when poor Miss Janie wishes you joy in that quiet, gentle way of hers, an' that sorter rainy smile, don't you go an' say anythin' about the late Skeeter Joe, otherwise Joseph Ducaine."

"But whar'll you be?" queried Ikey, in alarm. "Ain't you agoin' to see me through?"

It was now Old Man's turn to be embarrassed by the obstinate unconsciousness of his companion. "Look here, Ikey, you nat'ral born idgeot, was you allowin' as I was to stay on in the cabin?"

"In course, Old Man. Why not? It's yours, ain't it?"

"An' come between a man an' his wife, an' have to wash afore meals, an' be in reg'lar?"

Ikey was dazed by this sudden turn of events.

"You was allowin' I was such a dum fool as that?" queried Old Man, almost unable to bear the direct gaze of his simple companion. "Wal, not much. Old La'yer Simpson's got the deeds of the place, in case I don't git back——"

"What?"

"In case I don't git back for a whiles," returned Old Man, steadily.

Old Man's eyes travelled contemptuously round the room.

"All this white muslin business has sorter unsettled me. I'm thinkin' of makin' a trip to the Great Lone Lands to git a little fresh air."

Ikey sprang to his feet. "What! 'Ithout me, Old Man? 'Ithout me?"

"Of course, you pesky idgeot. You've got to stay at home an' comfort your wife, an'—an' clean the winders," retorted Old Man.

"Damn the winders!" said the usually placid Ikey. "Maybe you was allowin' you'd go off to-night 'ithout another word?" He went to the door, opened it, and walked round to the rude shanty where Old Man's mule was waiting ready saddled.

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Then he came back, the muscles of his mouth twitching, sat down by the fireplace, and hid his head in his hands. "I didn't think you'd have done it, Old Man. I didn't think you'd have done it."

Old Man affected to be busy with his accoutrements. When he had finished pottering about, he came up to Ikey, and laid one hand on his shoulder.

"Git up, you idgeot, or I'll larrup you."

Ikey sprang up, and pushed Old Man back against the wall with a force which astonished him.

"You're goin' away acause of her," he shouted. "Acause of her! I see it all now, blasted fool as I was. It's me as orter be goin' away; it's you as orter be tryin' on theseyer store-clothes an' shiney boots." He kicked the parcel contemptuously into the corner, walked to the window, and began to haul down the muslin curtains. "I was kind of allowin' to myself theseyer flower-pots didn't look nat'ral by no manner of means," he said, grinding one to pieces beneath his heel. "Ain't thar nothin' else as I kin smash afore we starts, Old Man?"

Old Man remained staring at Ikey with wide-opened mouth and eyes.

"Afore *we* starts?"

"Yes," said Ikey, doggedly turning round and facing him. "Afore *we* starts! I've bin a-lookin' after you an' takin' care of you all my life. You'd be lost 'ithout me, precious quick. I'll jest go an' saddle my old mare, an' we'll git away cumferably afore mornin'."

The stupendous nature of Ikey's delusion that Old Man was a helpless infant, who required incessant watchfulness to prevent his devious feet from straying, so completely nonplussed Old Man that he allowed Ikey to move towards the door with the avowed intention of saddling his own mare. Then he reached out a long arm, caught Ikey by the collar of his coat, and replaced him on the stool. "D'you think?" he inquired—"D'you think if you was under the yearth or in the heavens above the yearth, or in the air atween the heavens an' the yearth, as you could hide your trail from her? Brace up, Ikey! Brace up! You might travel to the Great Lone Lands—an' she'd be thar, sittin' on a stump waitin' for you; you might git

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a month's start for California—an' she'd be the first person to meet you when you got thar. She's a wonderful woman, Ikey; you orter be proud of her—dum proud."

He flung his arm round Ikey's neck in a careless, haphazard kind of way. Ikey gripped and held it hard.

"When you've quite done pawin' me about," Old Man presently resumed, in his customary cheerful manner—"When you've quite done makin' a partikler fool of yourself, Mr. Isaac Marston, I'll trouble you to have the kindness to bring round that thar mule, an' help me load up. I'll be back agin in a year or two."

Without a word, Ikey walked, as if in a dream, towards the door, went round to the shanty at the back, and presently returned with the mule.

Old Man sprang lightly into the saddle. "You pesky idgeot, what are you a-howlin' about?" he asked, affecting to busy himself with the reins.

Ikey suddenly reached up, caught Old Man in his arms, and gave him a convulsive hug.

The mule slowly started off as if reluctant to depart.

Ikey stood staring blindly after Old Man's retreating form as long as it was in sight; then went back to the hut, and sat down by his desolate hearth. The night was very grey.

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